

Impact of an Online EdD Programme on Personal Development and Professional Practices

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the
degree of Doctor of Education by Jamie Nicole Lopez

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband and child. Thank you for your support throughout this online EdD programme journey that began in 2012. I realize how many sacrifices that were made and cannot thank you enough for your understanding and love.

Author: Jamie Lopez

Title of Study: Impact of an Online EdD Programme on Personal Development and Professional Practices

Abstract

A professional doctorate in education degree (EdD) is a degree where students contextualize professional knowledge into a “theoretical academic framework” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015, p. 8). This study’s context is a 100% online EdD programme in the United Kingdom (UK) comprised of students throughout the world. Because online EdD programmes are relatively new, limited knowledge exists about the online EdD phenomenon from the students’ perspectives. In effect, the student voice about the online EdD is nearly absent in the literature but should be considered. How to fulfil the primary aim of the programme, to interrelate theory and professional practice and evoke social change (Costley, 2014), also has received limited attention.

Two main aims of this study are: (1) To investigate the impacts of the online EdD learning experiences and outcomes on the participants’ personal and professional development through a phenomenologically-informed lens; and (2) To advance the student voice about learning experiences in online EdD programmes. This thesis is phenomenologically-informed, which enabled an in-depth investigation and a “Textural-Structural Description” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The methods to collect data were interviews and document collection, which offered response triangulation and further analysis.

The study results indicated that the participants experienced emotional and social challenges (e.g., cultural and linguistic disconnections and incremental disorienting dilemmas) that the transnational higher education (TNHE) virtual learning environment (VLE) sometimes exacerbated. Five of the eight participants’ stories contained evidence of each transformative learning stage (explored further in section 4.6) (Mezirow, 1991). The majority of the participants applied new knowledge from the online EdD programme to their professional contexts to

effectuate social change, which is discussed in Chapters IV-V. This study draws attention to the online EdD phenomenon and furthers the discourse about the impacts of the online EdD on students' personal and professional development.

Key words: *professional doctorate in education (EdD); phenomenologically-informed; transformative learning; student voice*

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Thank you to my study participants for making this research possible. Because you have given your time and stories, this research has contributed the student voice that will lead to more enlightened (but far from comprehensive) perspectives about the online EdD phenomenon.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- DDP: Doctoral Development Plan
- EdD: Doctor of Education
- EHEA: European Higher Education Area
- HE: Higher Education
- HEI: Higher Education Institution
- ICT: Information Communication Technology
- PD: Professional Development
- PD: Professional Doctorate
- PGP: Personal Growth Plan
- PhD: Doctor of Philosophy
- PLC: Professional Learning Community
- TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language
- TNHE: Transnational Higher Education
- UK: United Kingdom
- USA: United States of America
- VLE: Virtual Learning Environment
- VPREC: Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee

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Chapter I Introduction

The Doctor of Education (EdD) in Higher Education is a professional doctorate that emphasizes developing professional skills and engaging in original research (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015). This thesis provides results from an investigation into the learning experiences of online, EdD students located in different countries yet participating in the same programme, exported from the United Kingdom (UK) via the internet. To protect the university's anonymity, its name will not be given but will be referred to as a university in the UK. Online EdD programmes being relatively young, not enough data exists on the student voice about the impact of the online EdD programme on its students' personal development and professional practices.

1.1 Research Background

This section will provide a discussion of transnational higher education (TNHE) and a description of the EdD as these are the two key components that form the research background of this study. TNHE may be understood as the general context of the online EdD programme and is widely defined as degree programmes that are exported or imported to other countries (Altbach, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Department for Business Innovation, & Skills, 2014; Knight, 2015). In transcending borders, TNHE increases interconnectedness among cultures, technologies, economies, and information (Zembylas, 2012). The majority of recent scholarly texts “uncritically treat the transnational phenomenon as a ‘given’” (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016, p. 22), but contextual factors influence the students' learning experiences. Different time zones, asynchronous discussions, intercultural interactions, and local contextual uniqueness are only a few of the specific factors that shape the student's learning experience. Technological advancements over the past decade have revolutionized the TNHE landscape and led to a surge in online programmes in developing countries (China, India, Brazil) (Collini, 2012; Cooper, 2006) and developed countries (UK and Germany) (British Council, 2012; British Council & German Academic Exchange Service, 2014; Burnard, 2016; Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2014; O'Neill, 2012). The increase in these programmes is projected to continue as more full-time, working professionals perceive online learning as a viable option for their professional development and degree plans.

Topics of transnational, offshore, cross-border, and borderless education have comprised a new thematic field for educational research (Kosmützky & Putty, 2016). A particular framework that one may use to understand the compendium of TNHE literature is from Kosmützky and Putty

(2016). Their framework includes main TNHE themes: overview and trends (Bannier, 2016; Lane, 2007; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007), quality assurance and regulation (Kuenssberg, 2015), teaching and learning (Bovill, Jordan, & Watters, 2015), institutional and management perspectives (Howells, Karataş-Özkan, Yavuz, & Atiq, 2014), governance and policy (Vögtle & Martens, 2014), and student choice and student mobility (Waters & Leung, 2013).

TNHE may refer to a range of HEI's that include international branch campuses, franchise universities, and distance education, which are terms that have been used interchangeably and resulted in unknown variables among TNHE host and sending nations (Knight, 2015; Lane, 2011). The distance education (import-export) model is the most relevant one in this study's background. This is when the sending institution is responsible for maintaining the institution's quality assurance, developing the curriculum, providing faculty, and granting the qualification/degree (Knight, 2015). However, even the import-export models vary widely. The institution in this study (that will be discussed in section 1.4) is similar to the import-export model in that it is responsible for providing oversight and granting the degrees yet different because it is audited by an external agency (the Quality Assurance Agency). All UK HEI's are audited by the Quality Assurance Agency to ensure quality across institutions. National and local policies specify expected learning outcomes of doctoral students.

One may further understand the expected learning outcomes and purposes of the professional doctorate by contrasting them with those of the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Scholars have questioned the purposes of the EdD given that the PhD has similar aims. The EdD is described as a degree for full-time professionals whose goals are to become educational leaders, improve professional practices (Golde & Walker, 2006; Lee & Danby, 2012), and fill knowledge gaps (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). The purpose of the professional doctorate is to engage in practitioner-research and offer an original contribution to knowledge, as it relates to professional practice (Costley, 2014). The PhD is described as more research intensive than the professional doctorate and not as focused on the professional context (Letiche & Lightfoot, 2014). All doctoral programmes in the UK, including the professional doctorate and PhD, have similar expectations: that students produce new knowledge, have a deep understanding of the research literature, apply methodology, uphold ethical standards, and demonstrate critical skills of excellence (Fulton, Kuit, Sanders, & Smith, 2013; Quality Assurance Agency, 2012). Despite the differences in the professional doctorate and PhD, the literature suggests that doctoral students undergo a range of

emotional, psychological, and social challenges (Hawley, 2010). Reasonable to question is whether or not the online, TNHE context problematises doctoral study.

Because of all of the experienced hardships among doctoral students, attrition rates are 50% or more (Jairam & Kahl, 2012), and this percentage is even higher for online students (Park & Choi, 2009; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014). High attrition rates have negative impacts of causing students to squander their time and resources, and research has documented the many stressors that doctoral students experience that impacts their emotional well-being and social relationships (Lee, 2009). Some key reasons for these high attrition rates include social isolation and limited support, among others, but not necessarily limited intelligence (Hawley, 2010). To astutely describe the doctoral journey, Hawley (2010) expressed that it “is an intensely emotional, ego-threatening venture within a highly charged political environment” (p. 7). Jairam and Kahl (2012) have researched social support systems and social connectedness among doctoral students, conveying that they mediate the doctoral students’ stress that affects their physical and psychological states. Further discussion of the social and emotional challenges among doctoral students will be included in Chapter II. Online EdD students’ stories may include the unique difficulties that they dealt with, how they dealt with them, what they learnt, and how they applied their learning to their professional contexts. These stories could potentially advance the current understanding of the online EdD phenomenon and hence better inform future research and professional practices.

1.2 My Interest in the Study

Curiosity about the online EdD phenomenon is mainly because I am an online EdD candidate. My professional role since 2006 is as a secondary English teacher at several inner-city high schools in the southern part of the United States (US). Since 2011, I have taught dual credit courses, which are a combination of high school and college courses, and held numerous “leadership” roles. Aiming to enhance pedagogical knowledge and apply it to teaching, I decided to pursue an online EdD degree and began my studies in 2012. I also pursued a doctorate to advance in my professional career and perhaps eventually teach adult professionals.

Before beginning my doctoral studies, I had searched for an online programme because as a full-time professional, the online platform suited my immediate learning needs. When researching doctoral programmes in 2011, I discovered that the first-tier HEI’s in the US did not provide 100% online EdD programmes. But finding a programme in the UK offered the prospect

of interacting with educational leaders and professionals from around the world, which is intriguing. Expanding one's worldview and encountering unique perspectives from professionals in diverse local contexts is valuable. From the beginning of my online EdD programme, I have noticed some improvements in my pedagogical approaches and been awarded three campus Teacher of the Year awards at three different high school campuses (at a middle college and two early colleges) within the span of four years.

Even though I had developed thesis ideas and constructed research study options in the modules, I aimed to find new educational problems and construct ideas to improve my professional development and practices now and in the long-term. I searched through books and articles whilst questioning my epistemological and methodological assumptions, indicative of the phenomenological perspective (Vagle, 2014). I began to believe that through understanding how other professionals applied knowledge, I could understand further how to improve my professional development and practices in alignment with the goal of teaching adult professionals. Various insightful books about powerful pedagogical practices for teaching adults has led to insights and practical applications (Cranton, 2003; Brookfield, 2013, 2015b; Daloz, 1999; Dirkx, 1997, 2012). Through continued self-examination and research about adult learning theories, transformation theory, or as it is consistently referred to throughout this thesis, transformative learning, became an area of interest.

Transformative learning is a contested concept but defined in this study as critically reflecting on problematic frames of reference that enable individuals to form more rational perspectives (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1991). Curiosity about transformative learning led to becoming more critically reflective, which is an integral skill to strengthen in the pursuit of the doctorate. I firstly questioned myself to see whether transformative learning occurred in my own learning, and this led me to ponder whether others had experienced transformative learning as a result of the online EdD programme.

1.3 Key Research Issues, Research Aims, and Study Significance

The initial research idea was formed based on my professional experience and personal research interests in the field of transformative learning and has been further developed over time. Within this section, this study's key research issues, research aims and the study's

significance will be discussed. Two issues in HE will be introduced here and explored in more depth in Chapter II.

- Negative perceptions within academia about the quality and learning outcomes of online EdD programmes;

Within the UK, any doctorate degree programme, online or face-to-face, is required to ensure standards of excellence (Jones et al., 2014; Taylor, 2008; Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008), but there are negative perceptions about online EdD programmes (Taylor, 2008). Deleterious perceptions of EdD quality may be attributed to its newness and differences from the PhD, which some academics call the ‘gold standard’ (Taylor, 2008). Although the face-to-face EdD was offered in the UK in the 1980s-1990s and now are offered at many UK universities (Costley, 2014), the first EdD originated at the University of Toronto in 1894, and then was introduced in the United States in the 1920s (Taylor, 2008). The PhD was established in medieval times in Paris, France around 1150 as a degree to prepare clergymen for their professional practice (Noble, 1994). Despite the projected benefits of online EdD study, mixed and sometimes negative perceptions proliferate (Bitusikova, 2009; Poole, 2011; Taylor, 2008). For instance, unfavourable perceptions of professional doctorates in general are that they may be purchased and lack the rigour of a PhD; nonetheless, some academics have conceptualized the professional doctorate as having a different path than the PhD with the same end result – a doctorate (Taylor, 2008). Education Schools Project (2005) conveyed that universities in the US that award online EdDs are diploma mills and proposed that the EdD in School Leadership be eliminated. In the UK, perceptions among academics about EdD quality varied, with some believing that the EdD was not equivalent to the PhD and could even jeopardize the very concept of a doctorate (Taylor, 2008).

Understanding more about the online EdD students’ experiences, or transformative learning experiences, if they do occur, during the online EdD may lead to original knowledge that addresses some of the negative perceptions. Although transformative learning is a contested topic, many researchers consider transformative learning to be the cardinal goal of adult education (Cranton, 2016; Ettling, 2012; Mezirow, 1991). Reasons why are because it effectuates improved critical reflection skills about knowledge, social relationships, and actions, allowing individuals to formulate more rational, discerning worldviews (Mezirow, 1991). Analysing the participants’ in-

depth stories about their personal development, if it does happen, could advance knowledge about the online EdD programme. Moreover, examining whether or not the online EdD students apply knowledge to their professional practices, as a result of their learning, may help to better understand the programme's outcomes through the students' perspectives. Thus, this deeper understanding may possibly substantiate or refute some of the negative perceptions.

Another main concern that is associated with negative perceptions of the online EdD is that a disconnection exists between theory and practice, in terms of coursework not preparing school leaders for their positions (Education Schools, 2005; Ghezzi, 2007; Levine & Dean, 2007). In the United States, curricular disarray is the term given for principals and superintendents who are not prepared for their jobs after earning an EdD, and a claim exists that school districts reward teachers for graduate education course completion, even if the course is not relevant to their work (Levine, 2005). These allegations are made with a disapproving tone that discounts the EdD and practitioners' efforts to improve their professional practices. Even though for those HEIs that explicitly provide written policies that underscore the interconnectedness of theory and professional practice, such as the one in this study, their written policies could be different from the reality and practices. Therefore, analysing the online EdD students' own learning stories is important in knowing if the programme indeed exhibits a disconnection between theory and practice and the extent to which it impacts personal and professional development.

- Emotional and social challenges that are associated with transformative learning outcomes.

Adult students in general experience various emotional and social challenges when experiencing transformative learning (or when engaged in critical reflection on hegemonic structures), which is well documented throughout the literature (Brookfield, 2000; Daloz, 2000; Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2000, 2009). But specific solutions to these problems, among online EdD students, are not provided. Sometimes doctoral student hardships are discussed with an unempathetic tone; the doctoral process is perceived as a rite of passage and any hardships, even though they result in over 50% attrition rates (discussed in section 1.1), are irrelevant. If doing a doctorate were easy, everyone would do it; whilst the colloquialism may be true, a quandary is whether or not the extensive psychological and social stressors are necessary to fulfil the doctoral-level requirements documented in the Quality Assurance Agency policies.

Whether the emotional and social strains relate to becoming skilled doctoral practitioners (where the emphasis is on the student's personal development and professional practices) or to another matter altogether is not elaborated on in the literature. Although developing social support may reduce stressors associated with transformative learning (Brookfield, 2000, 2010; Charaniya, 2012; Daloz, 2000; Green, 2012; Mälkki & Green, 2014) and doctoral study (Jairam & Kahl, 2012), specific methods to address the many stressors that online EdD students experience are not clearly delineated in the literature. Investigating the emotional and social challenges among online EdD students is a key policy issue that should be given more focus. In responding to the two identified key issues, this research study's aims were formed.

This study's main research aims are as follows:

1. To investigate the impacts of the online EdD learning experiences and outcomes on the participants' personal and professional development through a phenomenologically-informed lens;
2. To advance the student voice about learning experiences in online EdD programmes.

It is hoped that this study could make a small-scale contribution toward the significant issue of investigating transformative learning, if it indeed occurs. Potentially extending transformative learning to include the social and emotional perspectives into the theory, and understanding how online EdD students may apply learning to their professional practices is relevant. Stories are expected to add rich, layered data to the currently limited field of the online EdD phenomenon. By gaining a deeper understanding of participants' lifeworlds and the possible impact on personal and professional development, this should both influence negative perceptions about online EdD programmes and further its discourse.

1.4 The Research Context

Within the broad umbrella of TNHE's online education model, the focus in this study is on one particular online programme at a Russell Group HEI in the UK (see The Russell Group of Universities (2016) for further information if applicable), which has students and teaching staff located in different countries throughout the world. Based on an institutional document, in 2015,

431 online EdD students were enrolled. A global partner is responsible for managing all its online programmes, such as student and staff recruitment, administration, course management, and staff training and development. Three formats are available when participating in an EdD programme: face-to-face, blended model (partially online and face-to-face), and online. But in this study's context, the mode of study is 100% online. Academic requirements for entry include that students hold a master's degree related to social science or its equivalent, have three years of work experience, including managerial roles, engage in research tasks, and interact with professionals within HE contexts. Non-native English speakers are required to pass a Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) examination. The majority of the online EdD students are full-time professionals who are well-established in their careers and hold different positions (e.g., professors, administrators, policy advisors).

The online EdD programme in Higher Education consists of the pre-thesis stage, comprised of nine 10-week modules that offer 30 credits each, and thesis stage, including 180 credit modules, where the students write a 40-50,000 words thesis and engage in a viva voce examination. The pre-thesis stage modules appertain to becoming a doctoral practitioner, learning theory, learning environments, educational philosophy, values, leadership, research methods, action research, and internationalisation. Each module has a “doctoral tutor” and approximately 10-15 students, and the learning teams that focus on small group collaborative learning within each module generally consist of 3-6 students. A compulsory Doctoral Development Plan (DDP) module is completed during each 10-week module. In the DDP module, students are required to complete learning logs and reflective assignments. The students are expected to allot a minimum of 20 hours per week to their studies.

For each module, students complete an average of 2-3 major assignments, weekly discussions, and learning team work that should integrate original thought and make deep connections between theory and professional practice. Each module is organised by week, and weekly resources that include academic articles, books, and videos are posted. Discussion questions relating to the resources are provided. Students submit their initial 500-word minimum discussion through Turnitin, then post it on the online forum (public form of discussion), as well as present 3-5 follow-up discussion responses per week on the online forum. Students have access to fellow tutors and students' email addresses through the module platform and may contact them via module and university emails. Skype and Google Hangouts are informal,

optional social networking tools that may be used for both formal and informal learning team collaboration. Final learning team assignments (group work and individual) are posted on the forum for the tutor to grade and provide feedback.

The University's Framework for Online Professional Doctorates is applied to manage students on the pre-thesis stage with assessment as an inherent component. A Board of Examiners oversees students' academic progress to determine whether students' progress is satisfactory or not. Tutor feedback is provided in both the online forum, in the form of questioning, comments, and resource postings, and within the individual online gradebook of each student. Module specifications and rubrics provide descriptions of how discussion posts, hand-in assignments, and learning team assignments will be assessed.

The thesis stage typically spans between 2-3 years. Online EdD students on the thesis stage are required to participate in various Research Clusters and present their research proposal and findings to the online EdD community. The final thesis document should make an original contribution to knowledge and adhere to doctoral standards of the Quality Assurance Agency, as applicable for all UK institutions, both private and public. The thesis stage culminates in the viva voce examination, whereby both an Internal and External Examiner evaluate the student's work and decide if the work merits the credential. It is within this specific research context that this research study was conducted.

1.5 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of six chapters, and a synopsis for each will be presented here.

Chapter I: Introduction

The introduction elaborates on the research background, interest in the study, key issues, research aims, study significance, and the specific study context.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The literature review explores the research that has been conducted about five key topics: the virtual learning environment (VLE), challenges for online learners, quality and learning outcomes, as they relate to negative perceptions of online EdD programmes, disconnection

between theory and professional practice, and transformative learning. Gaps in the literature are specified and contribute to the construction of the research questions.

Chapter III: Methodology and Methods

Research questions will be presented based on the literature review results and the suitable methodology. Phenomenological analysis techniques are examined. The ethical considerations, particularly the critical reflexivity, taken to ensure trustworthiness and reliability are outlined.

Chapter IV: Presentation of Findings

The presentation of findings chapter contains biographical information about the participants, as well as the themes and sub-themes that were evident in the primary data. Justification of the findings, using participants' verbatim responses and clear reasoning to support the interpretations, is included.

Chapter V: Discussion and Impact

The discussion and impact chapter encompasses how the study's findings compare to the reviewed literature. How the study achieves its key aims, responds to the identified research gaps elaborated on in Chapter II, answers the research questions, and makes an original contribution to knowledge are coherently addressed. This chapter also provides a clear discussion of this study's theoretical and professional insights.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The conclusion presents the final summary, suggestions for future applications, study limitations, and methodological and personal reflections on how the thesis stage influenced professional development and practices.

Chapter II Literature Review

Formed based on the research background and the two identified research problems stated in Chapter I, Chapter II will underscore five main components. This literature review consists of a meticulous analysis on the following: (1) virtual learning environments (VLE's) and how they relate to online doctoral study more specifically; (2) challenges for online students, especially online doctoral students, which integrates a discussion of social, emotional, and psychological issues; (3) quality and learning doctoral outcomes, in relation to negative perceptions of online EdD programmes; (4) disconnection between theory and professional practice in educational settings; and (5) transformative learning theory and its criticisms. Discussed are limited research areas that resulted from the literature review.

To conduct this literature review, electronic databases, Google Scholar searches, and various libraries were used. This literature review contains information from books, journals, and other publications and took several years to reach saturation. The literature review's data collection process may stop once saturation is reached (Randolph, 2009) but staying abreast of new literature in the field is expected. Cooper's Taxonomy of Literature Reviews (Cooper, 1988) guided this chapter to ensure quality and an incorporation of published research results, practices, and theories. Lastly, a scoring rubric that includes five main categories – coverage, synthesis, methodology, significance, and rhetoric – enabled the assessment of this literature review (Boote & Beile, 2005).

2.1 The Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and Communities

In the literature, the terms online learning environment, Course Management Systems (CMS), and Learning Management Systems (LMS) and VLE are used interchangeably, but the term VLE will be used consistently throughout the thesis. A VLE may be defined as when 80% or more of the course is delivered online with few face-to-face interactions (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Oxford University Press (2016) describes a VLE as a system for “delivering learning materials to students via the web” (p. 1). Collaboration, assessment, student tracking, and communication are the main tools used in VLE's, which are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, making VLE's more convenient for part-time students and those in variant geographical locations (Oxford University Press, 2016). Blackboard, Moodle, and bespoke systems (developed locally at the university) are some examples of commercial VLE systems

that have the benefits of technical support, course consistency, and course delivery to a large number of students (Oxford University Press, 2016).

As VLE's offer course delivery to large amounts of students throughout the world, some issues should be addressed to develop an environment that is most conducive to learning among students with distinct cultural backgrounds. A VLE offers an intercultural learning environment, whereby communication and learning is different than in a face-to-face programme because of the technological forum and potential for diverse interactions among students from many cultures and with unique learning needs (Wang, 2007). Wang (2007) reported that VLE's have three main disconnections: cultural, linguistic, and instructional design. Cultural disconnection pertains to the unconscious biases, or tensions, that learners within an intercultural VLE experience; linguistic disconnection, also termed linguistic dissonance, is when learners experience difficulties associated with using English as a second language (e.g., slower reading rates, fewer discussion responses, and communication misunderstandings, not only because of language but in the absence of body gestures and facial expressions); instructional design that pertains to responsiveness to the students' cultural and learning needs within the VLE (Wang, 2007). Wang's (2007) research about VLE's led to seven specific professional practice recommendations that are discussed in-depth: (1) help online learners to improve skills that are necessary for learning in an intercultural VLE; (2) improve support facilities; (3) mitigate time consuming issues; (4) tutor's intervention; (5) adding cultural elements into course design and learning tasks; (6) award students for participating in learning tasks; and (7) integrate appropriate technologies. These seven recommendations may be considered among stakeholders who create, facilitate, and interact within VLE's, as the cultural, linguistic, and instructional delivery disconnections should be contemplated and mitigated as much as possible. Much of the literature about VLE's discusses minimizing disconnections, or barriers of learning on a VLE, by establishing a supportive community (Bollinger & Inan, 2012; Katernyak & Loboda, 2016; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004). VLE communities are conceptualized and termed in many different ways in the literature, and there is no consistent definition for community that is maintained throughout the literature. But the differences and similarities among various terms and distinctions among variant communities should be acknowledged and clarified.

In a wide range of literature about online doctoral students, in particular, and VLE's, much of the professional practice recommendations pertain to developing an online learning

community. Garrison and Anderson (2003) described a community of inquiry as integrating three central elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence relates to deep, higher-order learning, social presence refers to social and emotional connections that students build among each other, and teaching presence is the tutor's facilitation of cognitive and social presence, as well as learning (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). In a recent study of an international student cohort in an EdD in Higher Education programme, online learning communities were conceptualized using Garrison and Anderson's (2003) community of inquiry framework to examine the student 'interaction patterns' (Crosta, Manokore, & Gray, 2016, p. 55). After analysing interactions of three modules among online EdD students in one VLE, research conclusions were that not all students challenged each other when engaged in discussion on the VLE and that a 'pseudo online learning community' formed (Crosta et al., 2016). Main recommendations were that social presence and connections be better established and that the tutor take an active role in "encouraging, supporting, and connecting" (p. 55) students via the VLE (Crosta et al., 2016). As the definition of the community of inquiry has been clearly defined as relating to cognitive, social, and teaching presence in a VLE (Garrison & Anderson, 2003), it is important to distinguish the differences between it and a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A wide range of literature exists that examines online communities of practice, (or also called virtual communities of practice), which puts the emphasis on student VLE interactions that integrate dialogue, collaboration, trust, support, competence, and improvements to professional practice.

A community of practice includes "participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98). Any practitioner within any professional setting should be a member of a "respected community of practice" (p. 13), as this is the medium through which practitioners may continue to develop personally and professionally (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). One member within the community of practice may find solutions to practice-based problems and convince other members to apply specific solutions within their professional contexts (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In comparison, a main aim of the professional doctorate (PD) is to apply solutions and improve professional practices, which aligns well with the communities of practice theory.

Much of the literature uses the communities of practice theory to analyse learning among doctoral students within VLE's with the specific emphasis on building community and social presence. For instance, Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) focused on pedagogical issues that are important when teaching doctoral students in VLE's, centred on three issues: growth in professional doctorates, increase in student enrolment in professional doctorate programmes, and development of e-learning. The research conclusions were that tutors should find methods to involve online, professional doctoral students in "moving from a community of practitioners to a community of researchers" (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004, p. 140). Moreover, Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) described the new model of community of researchers, whereby communities of practice is the underpinning theory, as an exciting way to conceptualize working with professional doctoral students within VLE's. In addition, Katernyak and Loboda (2016) emphasized that learning within a VLE is an event whereby a community of practice is a "successful approach to workplace learning" (p. 2568). Those conclusions connect with the idea of online EdD students working within a community of practice to improve their professional practices, or workplace learning.

Since the community of practice theory's inception in 1991 by Lave and Wenger, the theory has evolved to include more than a localized community and is called a landscape of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The landscape of practice acknowledges complexities within knowledge milieus and power dynamics, thereby illuminating how professional occupations are a "complex landscape of different communities of practice" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 15). Particularly in an EdD VLE, the landscape transcends boundaries and integrates local, national, and global professional practices among intercultural students with significant professional knowledge and experience. Online EdD students typically engage in what could be considered communities of practice at their local professions (e.g., in professional learning communities), as well as in national communities of practice (e.g., during professional development trainings, conferences, and within broader social networks), and global communities of practice via EdD programme VLE's, when many students from distinct cultures share their experiences, solutions, and perspectives. Nonetheless, suggesting that online EdD students truly form a community of practice via VLE should not be assumed, though it is reasonable to suspect that students who share professional experiences and practices, as well as

knowledge perspectives about professional practices, could potentially form communities and develop social presence.

The Figure 2.1 below is an outcome of the literature review about VLE's and demonstrates communities as the first key concept that is used to understand the ultimate outcome of an effective VLE among online EdD students that maximizes student learning and social support. From the literature about communities, there is a discussion of online learning communities more generally. The online learning communities may develop into the community of inquiry if certain components are evident: students challenging each other respectfully and taking responsibility for their learning, as well as strong cognitive, social, and teacher presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Secondly, Figure 2.1 illustrates another key type of community, which is the communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that eventually evolved to be more inclusive, thereby recognizing professional knowledge and practice complexities that transcend localized boundaries: landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Lastly, the community of researchers is a concept that is based on communities of practice and has been applied to professional doctoral students (Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004).

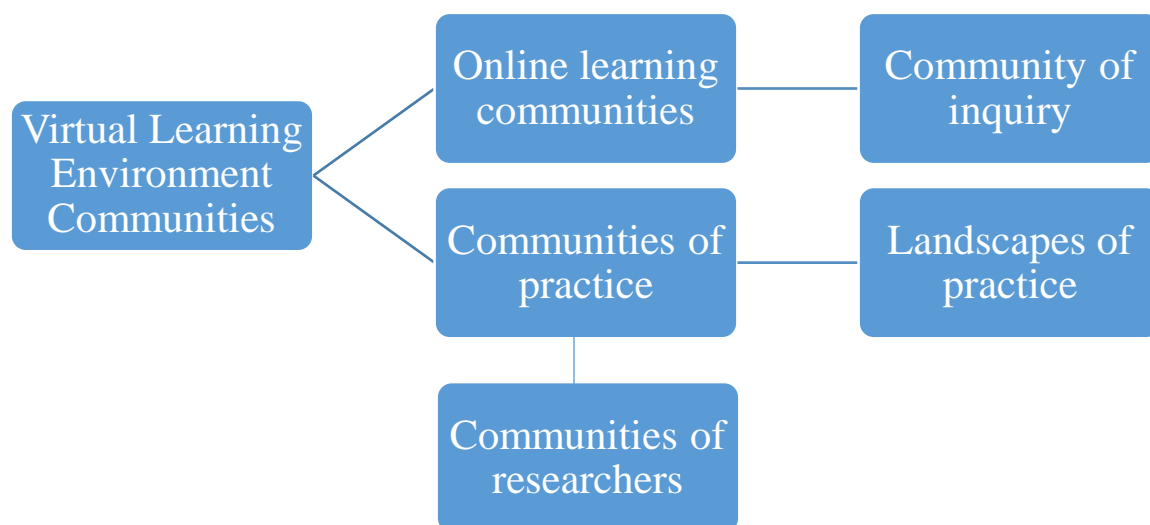


Figure 2.1 Visualization of literature review on VLE communities

2.2 Key Challenges for Online Students

This section will discuss social, emotional, and psychological challenges for online students. In the previous section, a discussion was offered about disconnections related to cultural, linguistic, and instructional design in VLE's (Wang, 2007). Whilst these are some relevant challenges for online students, especially English as a Second Language students, much of the literature also discusses challenges related to social connectedness (Brown & Wilson, 2016; Lee & Robbins, 1998) and social presence (Dixson, 2010). Moreover, the literature also discusses emotional and psychological challenges, particularly among doctoral students, indicating that one in three develops a psychiatric disorder as a result of psychological distress (Bothwell, 2017).

Research results often indicate that online students feel socially isolated and disconnected from the learning environment, which are main social challenges that should be underscored. Connectedness may be defined as a feeling of acceptance and belonging that sometimes may be strengthened with social presence and social support within a community (Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007). The social isolation, loneliness, and disconnection that online students feel has led to reduced interactions among students and tutors, a poorer learning experience and increased attrition rates (Bollinger & Inan, 2012). Online students have indicated that they would like to interact meaningfully in the VLE and become engaged members of the online community with better connections among students and tutors (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson, & Young, 2014). The physical separation in the VLE often hinders developing social presence, social support, and an authentic community, yet maintaining these three elements has led to more positive learning outcomes and improved student satisfaction in online programmes (Bollinger & Inan, 2012).

Solutions to the social challenges that online students experience have been presented in the literature and often relate to the community concept discussed in 2.1. For example, Online Caring Groups, in particular, were developed to “intentionally promote engagement, social presence, and a virtual community” (Brown & Wilson, 2016, p. 402). Based on numerous studies of caring groups and strategies in the literature that pertain to teaching online, Brown and Wilson (2016) developed the caring groups framework to improve social presence, engagement, belongingness, support, and community. Whilst these caring groups were successful, challenges

pertained to “organizational structure and faculty time for implementation” (p. 406), and the recommendations were that there be more faculty trainings about caring group facilitation, as well as evaluation on the effectiveness of the caring groups each year (Brown & Wilson, 2016).

Tutor presence sometimes may be more important than student interactions in developing learning communities (Drouin, 2008). Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) emphasized the relevance of tutor presence in helping doctoral students “to find their own voice within a community of academic researchers” (p. 136), where the onus is on the tutors to design learning tasks and facilitate an effective VLE to promote collaboration and the “perception of community” (p. 136). Furthermore, Wikeley and Muschamp (2004) underscored the significance of tutors finding ways to include online doctoral students in the research community, in order to address social challenges of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection.

Whilst online communities have assuaged some social challenges among online students, research also demonstrates that sometimes a “community of practice may fail to provide PhD students with adequate support and shared control” (p. 2), thereby exacerbating social challenges (Pyhältö, Toom, Stubb, & Lonka, 2012). Among Finnish doctoral candidates, although responses about social challenges varied widely, the idea of a community was perceived “as a burden slightly more often than as inspiration and empowerment” (Pyhältö et al., 2012, p. 2). 21% of the Finnish doctoral students discussed social challenges that related to student and tutor interactions and supervision within the community (Pyhältö et al., 2012). Lacking social support and a limited perception of community generated more social challenges: “Some students described academic abuse, such as discrimination based on sex and verbal abuse...” (Pyhältö et al., p. 5). Whilst dysfunctional relationships among doctoral students and tutors may generate more social challenges, research results substantiate the importance of developing supportive relationships among tutors, other doctoral students, family, and friends. Positive social support systems, if developed effectively, have the potential to mitigate stress and social isolation, which may be the main causes of doctoral student attrition (Jairam & Kahl, 2012). Jairam and Kahl (2012) recommended that future doctoral students maintain academic friends, family assistance, and positive relationships with faculty, who are empathetic and supportive. In other words, establishing healthy support systems among doctoral students often results in better learning experiences and persistence.

Positive and detrimental emotions potentially improve or delimit learning in VLE's (Järvenoja & Järvelä, 2005). The range of emotional challenges among face-to-face doctoral students could be stressful, lonely, terrifying, and overwhelming (Lee, 2009), which often are intensified in a VLE. Researchers have shown that stressful feelings occur during some communications in VLE's (Ng, 2001) and that anxiety, loneliness, and stress are main negative emotional responses among online students (Zembylas, Teodorou, & Pavlakis, 2008). Because of the lacking body language and facial cues in the VLE, as mentioned in section 2.1, miscommunications sometimes cause a negative emotional response and problem projection (Dirkx & Smith, 2009). Main recommendations to reduce emotional challenges include becoming familiar with the technology, enhancing communication among students and tutors, and accommodating students' learning needs in a well-organized and timely way (Zembylas et al., 2008).

Both the social and emotional challenges that online students experience, if not dealt with adequately, may result in intensified psychological issues. Researchers in both the US and UK have indicated that many doctoral students, approximately one third, suffer from depression, anxiety, sleeping problems, and other psychological issues (Bothwell, 2017). Hawley (2010) elaborated on the unique psychological demands and stressors that doctoral students experience and the *laissez-faire* attitude among some but not all supervisors. For example, some supervisors believe that emotions are soft and should not be considered when working with a doctoral candidate on a cognitive (hard) task of writing a dissertation (Hawley, 2010). For instance, "One well-published, dignified old-timer declared that he had gone through bloody hell writing his dissertation and wasn't about to hold any student's hand" (Hawley, 2010, p. 25). Making connections among the published literature about the complex challenges that doctoral students in any programme (face-to-face, blended or online) experience, as well as the specific emotional, social, and psychological challenges that online students experience, convey the extreme difficulties among online EdD students in particular. Limited research about the social, emotional, and psychological challenges that online EdD students experience presents a gap in knowledge that will be given further discussion in section 2.6.

2.3 Quality and Learning Doctoral Outcomes

The Quality Assurance Agency (2011, 2015) in the UK sets the doctoral degree policies and standards, which specify quality and learning outcomes for doctoral students. Within the Quality Assurance Agency policies, quality and learning outcomes among PhD and EdD students are not distinct. All doctoral students are expected to engage in research, think critically and solve problems, produce an original work, engage in independent study, uphold ethical research standards, “support, collaborate with and lead colleagues...” (p. 5), and build relationships, for examples (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015). The Quality Assurance Agency (2015) has developed the Qualifications Frameworks to provide general information about doctoral students’ qualities, competences, and skills upon graduation. *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (Quality Assurance Agency, 2008) situates the UK doctorate “in a wider European or international context, particularly the Salzburg principles and the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)” (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015, p. 3). The specific purposes of the professional doctorates, such as the EdD, are to “research and develop an original contribution to practice through practitioner-researcher thus giving greater primacy to practice knowledge” (Costley, 2014, p. 1). The practice knowledge that Costley (2014) discussed is expected to be applied and promote social change.

Many EdD programmes in the UK have varying requirements and even differences in programme length (from 3-7 years) (Burgess & Wellington, 2010). These differences could contribute to quality and learning outcome concerns among variant EdD programmes. In addition, students’ stories of EdD quality and learning outcomes often are both positive and negative. As an example, Burgess and Wellington (2010) conducted ethnographic research on the impact that a face-to-face, not online, EdD had on students’ professional practice and development. Concentrated on the students’ ‘voice’, the stories among eight students ultimately revealed an impact on professional careers, discourse, and personal lives (Burgess & Wellington, 2010). Impact did not have solely a positive connotation, as some students asserted that the impacts or outcomes of the EdD were troubling, describing associated stress and stigmas. In terms of stigmas, one student’s co-worker asked if a “proper PhD” (p. 172) would follow the EdD (Burgess & Wellington, 2010). But negative stories were not entirely common among the voices that Burgess and Wellington (2010) conveyed. More examples emphasized how personal

skills “unrecognized or dormant in an individual emerged as well as the realisation of the power of research for bringing about social change” (Burgess & Wellington, 2010, p. 173). One could view research that promotes social change as a quality learning outcome. Even though social change is difficult to measure, one would expect that the knowledge gained during an EdD to be connected to professional practice and therefore lead to some types of professional and social change.

Despite the clear quality and standards descriptors, benchmarks and qualifications, that the Quality Assurance Agency (2008, 2015) specifies, distinct interpretations and continued debate about them proliferate (Taylor, 2008). Perhaps, the reason why much debate exists about ‘doctorateness’, quality, and learning outcomes is because Quality Assurance Agency policies are not provided in extensive detail, causing the reader to assume what different skills mean (i.e., ‘mastery of the subject’) (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). In addition, Quality Assurance Agency policies and the UK Council for Graduate Education “avoid stating in detail what candidates have to do to produce a thesis that would gain a pass” (Trafford & Leshem, 2009, p. 307). Because national and local policies are somewhat vague, having an in-depth description of quality and learning outcomes would be helpful. In addition, defining what ‘doctorateness’ means has been given attention in the research, as this term often leads to debate.

Wellington (2013) offered five key areas whereby ‘doctorateness’ may be conceptualized: purposes, impact, written regulations, examination process, and individuals’ voices. Some purposes of the doctorate include preparing for a future career, advancing in one’s career, improving skills, developing personally, and producing new knowledge (Wellington, 2013). The key skills that doctoral students should strengthen are professional development planning, critical thinking in research, communities of practice, writing strategies that integrate reflection and reflexivity, and time management (Lee, 2008). Primary impacts of earning a doctorate incorporate themes of professional career, personal life, and discourse improvements (Wellington, 2013). The written regulations include a synthesis of local HEI policies that are situated in Quality Assurance Agency policies and clearly specify the quality and learning outcomes (Wellington, 2013). The written dissertation and viva voce are essential elements of the doctoral assessment process, which include producing an authentic, scholarly, professional, and well-structured thesis and defending it (Wellington, 2013). Different voices about ‘doctorateness’ include perspectives of the supervisors, examiners, and students, who

authentically express what quality and learning outcomes among doctoral graduates means. These unique voices convey that perceptions about doctorates in the UK vary widely among stakeholders, and debates about ‘doctorateness’ continue.

A doctoral thesis that passes may be viewed as a detailed example of the expected quality and learning outcomes of an EdD. Generally speaking, “Doctorateness therefore results from specific critical research features being present in a doctoral thesis” (Trafford & Leshem, 2009, p. 308). Nonetheless, many examiners view the doctoral thesis uniquely and search for certain criteria more closely than others. Whereas some thesis examiners prioritize coherence, others examine research questions, or conceptualisation of findings, or a range of different elements (Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Despite different perceptions of ‘doctorateness’ and a quality thesis that demonstrates doctoral learning outcomes, the clear indicators for a doctorate include “the creation and interpretation of new knowledge... a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge... the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project... [and] a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced inquiry” (Taylor, 2008, p. 75). Taylor (2008) also specified skills and actions that doctorate holders will develop and enact, as well as a detailed discussion of clear guidelines that further specify quality and learning outcomes. In this section, an overview of the UK’s Quality Assurance Agency policies and how these shape perceptions about quality and learning outcomes among EdD students was discussed. Also emphasized were various studies that describe ‘doctorateness’ in-depth and further clarify general policies that may be interpreted in different ways. The next section will highlight what is meant by a disconnection between theory and practice, which also will illuminate detailed examples of how theory and practice may be synergised.

2.4 Disconnection between Theory and Practice in Educational Settings

In this section, variant definitions of theory and practice will be explored, and a discussion about why the disconnection should be addressed. Henschke (1994) traced the historical background of theory and practice and presented distinct points of view. For example, one definition of theory is a doctrine that does not incorporate practice, whereas practice is an action, or performance, that is separate from theory. Another perspective highlighted the necessary alliance between theory and practice, first in Knowles (1962) and then in Brookfield (1988), whereby theory should inform professional practice. If professional practice is not based

on an underpinning theoretical guide, based on empirical research, then does theory serve any pragmatic purpose, or should professionals even learn theory when training for their professional positions? Certainly not, the point is that educational theory, research, and practice should be interrelated to improve educational quality and students' learning outcomes.

Compartmentalizing theory and practice has led to an inaccurate dichotomy or an unnatural disconnection between the two (Lindgren, 1959). Lindgren (1959) expressed that “all practice – in education, as well as in other fields – is based on theory” (p. 333). Applying theoretical concepts to the professional context enables future tutors to better understand the significance of learning theory (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) advocated for a connection between theory and practice through means of active learning and engagement, which includes encouraging questions, open communication, creativity, an emphasis on students' prior experiences, and other actions. Henschke (1994) explained the purposes of bridging the theory practice gap to better facilitate adult education. Theory informs learning tasks that adults prefer: “experiential learning techniques, discussion time being allotted in conjunction with a lecture if one is given, interaction with others in small groupings...” (Henschke, 1994, p. 50). But in many educational settings, adults are treated childishly, lectured to, and their prior experiences are not considered to be relevant to the lesson (Henschke, 1994). This very disconnection between theory and practice is what often dissatisfies the adult student, making the classroom stifling.

A majority of learning theorists (e.g., Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Freire) have conceptualized learning from a pragmatic perspective, through the lens of constructivism, asserting that human beings construct knowledge based on their experiences (Gordon, 2009). Generally speaking, a constructivist tenet is that knowledge is “constructed by human beings in their interaction with the world” (Gordon, 2009, p. 39). Social and cultural contexts, as well as individuals' values and experiences, influence theoretical knowledge and vice versa. Theory and professional practice should not be disconnected because theory is a professional practice guide, and the former is based on issues that arise in the educational, research context. The professional context is the medium whereby theoretical knowledge based on research may be demonstrated in professional practices. Nonetheless, different types of constructivist beliefs exist in the literature and although they share similar elements, differences are evident (Gordon, 2009).

Constructivism has been widely applied to a variety of disciplines: linguistics, cultural studies, psychology, and others, which are not specifically related to education, thus an investigation of the underpinning assumptions that are associated with constructivism is needed (Davis & Sumara, 2002). The type of constructivism that is relevant in the educational field is a pragmatic constructivism that is based on concrete criteria and guidelines for tutors (Gordon, 2009). The pragmatic constructivism connects theory and practice, clearly specifying the educational, professional practices that evolve from distinct theoretical perspectives. Most relevant in furthering the theory and practice discourse is that tutors reflect critically on their professional teaching practices to ensure that they are based on theoretical conceptions that are clearly delineated. To claim to uphold pragmatic constructivist tenets yet to lecture primarily demonstrates a behaviourist, not constructivist, theoretical approach. Nonetheless, some lecturing should have its place in the classroom. Ultimately, critical reflection, which will be discussed in more depth in section 2.5, is a significant professional practice that will enable the further investigation of personal assumptions and connection of theory and practice.

Bautista and Ortega-Ruiz (2015) maintained that the disconnection between theory and professional practice has weakened educational quality, and local policies often supersede scientific research about effective educational practices. The disconnection between research and practice suggests that theoretical advancements often do not inform policy or professional practice. For example, in both teaching students and engaging tutors in professional development, research has demonstrated that exorbitant funding is spent on professional development but that a majority of professional development is “inefficient, having small or no effect on teaching practices and/or student learning” (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015, p. 240). During professional development, students are often expected to passively listen to a lecture and not collaborate or engage in an active, constructivist learning environment (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015), thereby emphasizing the very problem with adult education classrooms mentioned previously in Henschke (1994). Tutor professional development has models and theoretical perspectives that underpin it (Avalos, 2011), yet often these models and perspectives are not merged into professional practice, which reduces educational quality and learning (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015). The disconnection between theory and practice is an issue in professional development and educational practices in many professional contexts and has been widely acknowledged as a challenge to address.

Discussed further in section 2.3 was that an essential purpose of professional doctorates, be they face-to-face or in a different discipline than education, is to make an original knowledge contribution that impacts professional practices (Costley, 2014). The Quality Assurance Agency (2015) indicates that professional doctorates “provide the opportunity for individuals to situate professional knowledge developed over time in a theoretical academic framework” (p. 8). This distinct aim of the online EdD makes clear the significance of interconnecting theoretical knowledge and professional practices, in order to impact professional development and practices among its students.

2.5 Transformative Learning Theory and Its Criticisms

Transformative learning is part of this literature review as it is the main theoretical ground for the study and also the research subject (i.e. to investigate learning experiences related (or not related) to transformative learning and its impact on the online EdD outcomes). Mezirow (1978, 1991, 2000, 2009) is the founder of transformation theory, also called transformative learning (Cranton, 2016), which is the consistent term that will be used. The philosophical background of transformative learning includes constructivism (Creswell, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978), humanism (Maslow, 1970), and critical social theory (Brookfield, 2000, 2005, 2009; Freire, 1970; Jarvis, 2012; Mezirow, 1991). Generally speaking, constructivism stresses that learning is a social process of constructing meaning through interactions (Bourdieu, 1986; Hara, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 2000); humanism underscores therapeutic dialogues and how one’s personal development is limitless (Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1961), and critical social theory integrates critical reflection on hegemonic structures (Brookfield, 2009). Transformative learning is a ten-stage learning process that results in perspective change and acting on changed meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991, 2009). The 10-stage transformative learning process verbatim is as follows:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions

6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

Reflection and dialectic discourse are the primary mediums by which the transformative learning process occurs (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991, 2000) discussed three reflective types: content, process, and premise reflection. Reflecting on what one knows (content), how one knows (process), and why one knows (premise) comprise a reflective framework that forms the basis for critical reflection. Critical reflection has been conceptualized as reflecting on power structures and oppression (i.e., how power influences one's assumptions and actions) (Brookfield, 1990, 2000). Teachers should learn how to facilitate critical reflection, since this is a significant learning task in not only facilitating transformative learning but in delivering effective instruction more generally. Teachers are expected to deliver quality instruction whilst helping students to think critically about social injustices and oppression that plague the world (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

Given the two main concepts of critical reflection and dialectic discourse that are embedded within transformative learning, widely discussed throughout the literature are practical learning tasks that relate to these concepts (e.g., reflective journals, writing teams, coaching) (Alcántara, Hayes, & Yorks, 2009; Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Dominicé, 1990; Easton, Monkman & Miles, 2009; Elkjaer, 2009; Lukinsky, 1990; Meyer, 2009). Researchers emphasize teacher questioning (Cranton, 2016), role play (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Cranton, 2016; Jones, 2007), and dialogues (Taylor, 2009; Tyler & Swartz, 2012) to facilitate transformative learning, which relate to both the critical reflection and dialectic discourse tasks. The Critical Incident Form (Brookfield, 1990) and a variety of reflective documents are offered in the literature that facilitate students' critical reflection in a pragmatic and effective manner.

Whereas basic learning pertains to acquiring new knowledge and not calling into question assumptions, transformative learning mainly pertains to critical reflection and challenging types of assumptions. Transformative learning has been conceptualized in distinct ways and related to different types of knowledge (Cranton, 2000, 2016; Mezirow, 1991; Tisdell, 2012). For example,

there are three types of knowledge: (1) technical (instrumental) knowledge: based on cause and effect, scientific knowledge, and changing the environment; (2) practical (communicative) knowledge: dependent on knowledge of self, others, and groups; and (3) emancipatory knowledge: questioning technical and practical knowledge to free individuals from personal and social constraints (Cranton, 2016). Transformative learning is most closely associated with emancipatory knowledge, and “Meaningful learning integrates instrumental and communicative knowledge, and emancipatory learning occurs when that knowledge changes a person’s perspective of himself and the world” (Cranton, 2016, p. 13). Thus, transformative learning may be distinguished from any other types of learning because the former involves emancipatory knowledge. Unique types of experiences cause transformative learning, including psychological dilemmas, trauma, educational experiences, social change, and spirituality (Cranton, 2016). And the two dimensions of the transformative learning process are ways of knowing (i.e. critical reflection and extrarational perspectives) and temporal frames (i.e. epochal, incremental, or developmental) (Cranton, 2016).

Transformative learning has been widely applied to a variety of research contexts and used as a lens to analyse quality learning outcomes. One of the earliest studies where transformative learning in an online context was researched was in a mixed methods study involving 253 participants, including Registered Nurses (RNs) and Bachelor of Science in Nursing students (BSNs) (Cragg, Plotnikoff, Hugo, & Casey, 2001). Participant groups included entering RN-to-BSN students ($n = 96$), generic nurse graduates ($n = 51$), and RN-to-BSN graduates ($n = 106$). The socialization scales were interrelated to higher rates of perspective transformation (Cragg et al., 2001) (i.e., transformative learning). The RN and BSN groups included students who took face-to-face courses, 100% online courses, and blended learning courses. Cragg et al. (2001) determined that BSN students who took the completely online learning courses had the highest professional values scale scores and were viewed as those who experienced transformative learning the most. This study did not differentiate transformative learning stages, consider a range of variables, or offer professional practice suggestions. Since the former study, another has suggested that the online context provides a compelling context to explore the collaborative psychological and emotional experiences of graduate students (Dirkx & Smith, 2009). Main learning tasks that promote transformative learning in an online context include practice-based problems, collaborative learning tasks, team writing, individual and collaborative debriefs, reflective tasks, and journal writing (Dirkx & Smith, 2009).

In another research study about transformative learning in an online context, researchers developed a partnership with two campuses to teach an undergraduate course about politics in the US and Mexico (Barraclough & McMahon, 2013). One institution was a public college in South Texas, comprised of economically disadvantaged, Hispanic undergraduates, and the other campus was a private college in Michigan, with an economically privileged student body. As a result of the online partnership, both participant groups explained that they experienced transformative learning that changed their perspectives about immigration and power dynamics within universities. Learning tasks that were viewed as most important in promoting transformative learning were critical reflection and video chats whereby participants from each diverse group engaged in dialectic discourse.

Enger and Lajimodiere (2011) determined that online transformative learning could reduce if not eradicate discrimination, which seems to be a somewhat grandiose claim. The multicultural course included critical reflection, dialectic discourse, and multicultural texts and movies (e.g., *Schindler's List*), where students viewed extreme racial oppression and engaged in critical analysis. Enger and Lajimodiere (2011) contended that the online Blackboard forum stimulated transformative learning and social action because online learning environments allow students to reflect critically on their thoughts and writing. In addition, Provident et al. (2015) established that effective learning tasks to promote transformative learning among 113 occupational therapy clinical doctoral students in an online context were reflections, dialogues, projects, cohort model, active learning, and applying theory to professional contexts. Despite some studies about how the online context may facilitate transformative learning, widely considered to be a quality learning outcome, few studies, if any, focus specifically on online EdD students' transformative learning experiences. Thus, this research gap presents key questions about how online EdD students experience learning, or if they experience transformative learning, and how the online EdD programme impacts students' professional development and practices, which will be discussed further in section 4.6.

Even though transformative learning theory holds prominence throughout social science research, numerous criticisms should be addressed, some that question its conceptualisation and existence altogether. Newman (2012) contends that six main flaws exist in transformative learning explanations, and "Transformative learning may not exist as an identifiable phenomenon" (p. 36). Instead, he believes that *good learning* is more accurate terminology for what other authors call

transformative learning (Newman, 2012, 2014). Although not all learning is transformative, all transformative learning includes learning, and learning that is not transformative could be considered good learning (such as learning how to perform open heart surgery, fly a plane, or teach essay writing). Distinctions in types of learning need to be made for the teacher to incorporate various teaching practices and make necessary preparations to do so: whether they be technical, practical or emancipatory. Newman (2012) contends that a main problem with the transformative learning theory is that to decipher whether or not it has occurred, researchers depend on individuals' stories that "prove nothing" (p.40) because they are unreliable. But if one believes that individuals' perceptions shape individuals' realities, then stories do prove something; they prove how students experience their learning, which is something that the teacher need know to adjust and differentiate instruction.

Abandoning the word transformative results in an acceptance that all learning is similar and that learners do not have to overcome a dilemma because it does not exist, Newman (2012) says. But how could one deny that learners often have very real and painful dilemmas that require teachers and students to possess a metacognitive empathy? Whilst in the professional world and in our personal lives, sharing our innermost reflections about race relations, governmental incompetence, poverty, oppression, gender discrimination, violence, and an array of other very real dilemmas, we may not always feel free to be completely authentic. But a good learning environment, regardless of whether or not it is in a university, online, or in someone's home, demands honesty and some uncomfortableness, not consensus building, but genuine, unfettered authenticity, even if it means disagreeing with everyone there. A logical thought process need not external affirmation but rather others to challenge, question, and explain their thought processes in collaborative efforts to better understand the world and deal with the very real dilemmas that we experience. If one simply ignores dilemmas, they do not go away or work themselves out naturally: instead, they fester.

Another flaw that Newman (2012) points out is that underscoring one's role pertains to identity instead of consciousness and that Mezirow does not distinguish between identity and consciousness. But this distinction is made when in stage three, Mezirow (1991) explains that there is a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions. This stage pertains to one's consciousness and assumptions that previously were unquestioned and that were formed from one's childhood throughout life. And Freire's idea of praxis, or the merging of reflection and

action, is evident in Mezirow's transformative learning stage five when the individual explores not only new roles and relationships but actions in response to the critical reflections on assumptions that shape consciousness. Transformative learning is a collective activity with various stages distinguished to better guide the student and teacher in paying attention to this complex process. Newman (2012) asserts that "We are, internally, profoundly, the same person as the child of our earliest memories" (p.44), whilst he also states that "Consciousness is a project in the making from our earliest days until our death" (p. 42). These two statements need further clarification and synergy. Whilst it is true that consciousness does have a continuity in that adults remember many experiences that they had as children, it is not true that adults have the same minds as they did when they were children; since as children, they did not reflect critically on their assumptions or have the capacity to comprehend the historical legacy of gender discrimination and power structures that sometimes lead to tragic outcomes.

The third flaw that Newman (2012) expresses is that undergirding transformative learning is the incorrect premise that learning is finite. Newman reads Mezirow's theory as having a commencement and end, but instead, the theory is meant to be viewed as descriptive of quality, emancipatory adult learning, which does not necessarily mean that it cannot be cyclical. Mezirow suggests that these stages occur when adults experience the highest form of learning, but he does not argue that this highest form of learning happens only once. Instead, transformative learning is not a finite process but a type of adult learning that occurs when adults experience new dilemmas that arise throughout their lives. These dilemmas most typically are not singular or all-encompassing in nature but incremental, Daloz (2000) believes, and I agree. Nonetheless, a disorienting dilemma could be profound and singular in nature (e.g., death of a loved one). As regards an adult who has never questioned prior assumptions about the right to bear Arms, if that adult were to experience the death of a child because of someone who legally holds a permit to bear Arms, that adult may begin to question his or her sociocultural assumptions. The existential crisis that the adult experiences could eventually result in an anti-gun violence activism, whereby the adult's mindset and actions have completely metamorphosed, as they relate to gun violence and also in relation to other taken for granted assumptions.

Another flaw that Newman (2012) underscores is the centrality of discourse in transformative learning. One condition for effective discourse, according to Mezirow (2009), is that people have empathy for others, to which Newman replies that some people do not deserve

his empathy. Mezirow did not suggest that one empathize with or accept beliefs of all individuals who commit atrocities but rather that to engage in effective, authentic discourse, one must not readily commit to judgements and unwavering disdain for different viewpoints. Instead, one must attentively listen to understand the other person's perspective without blinding biases that do not allow the adult to engage in critical awareness and rational thought processes. If all individuals who participate in the discourse exhibit empathy, a more constructive discussion could occur. Newman (2012) mentions various other problems that he has with transformative learning theory that should be examined more closely. Dirkx (2012) argues that Newman's analysis relies on a "Sociological understanding of self-formation that minimizes important psychological dynamics associated with consciousness development" (p. 399) but that Newman is correct in his criticism of "Transformative learning for conceptual and methodological looseness" (p. 404). Newman asserts that transformative learning sometimes has been applied to any setting without a serious study of what it is. Indeed, transformative learning is more than gaining skills, changing actions, or having a new job title, but rather, transformative learning is a holistic, infinite process of self-questioning and change that merges thinking deeper about assumptions and interacting with others to deal with the dilemmas that plague our world. In the next section, further attention will be drawn to the research gaps that this study aims to fill.

2.6 Limited Research

Limited research exists about online EdD students, generally speaking, perhaps because of how young that online EdD programmes are. A key research gap is the quality and learning outcomes among online EdD students, in light of the negative perceptions of EdD study (or more specifically, online EdD study), which is not widely available in the literature. Another area where extremely limited research exists is whether or not online EdD students experience some form of transformative learning, which is conceptualized in this study as a quality learning outcome. The reason is because transformative learning indicates that individuals have reflected critically on their meaning perspectives and developed more discerning worldviews (Mezirow, 1991), which should be a distinct outcome of any quality, educational programme. Knowledge about the emotional and social challenges among online EdD students has not been adequately researched, and emotional and social components of transformative learning have not been fully integrated into what many call a cognitive theory. How the online EdD students apply knowledge from the programme to their professional context is not discussed in-depth, but this

issue is directly associated with learning outcomes and negative perceptions of online EdD programmes. In this study, my intent is to focus on the following limited research areas, specifically in relation to online EdD students (1) quality and learning outcomes; (2) transformative learning outcomes; (3) emotional and social challenges; and (4) connections between theoretical knowledge and professional practice applications.

In section 2.3, indicated were the expected quality learning outcomes among doctoral students, specified in Quality Assurance Agency policy and situated in local policies. Nonetheless, limited research about how these quality learning outcomes are measured or manifest themselves in a professional context among online EdD students is available. The student voice among online EdD students is close to silenced in the research, and limited data contributed. As transformative learning is conceptualized as a quality learning outcome because of its expected effect of developing less biased ontological perspectives, more research is needed to understand which specific factors promote transformative learning outcomes in any learning context (Boyer et al., 2006; Mälkki & Green, 2014; Provident et al., 2015; Stevens-Long, Schapiro, & McClintock, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2013; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Recently, Cranton (2016) has contributed an expert's perspective about how adult teachers may promote transformative learning in the practical sense. A gap still remains among online EdD students' learning experiences and their transformative learning experiences, if they do occur. Investigating transformative learning is elusive, and more research studies about how the online context influences transformative learning outcomes is needed (Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Smith, 2012). In addition, contextual considerations in transformative learning research are barely given consideration (Taylor, 2009).

Doctoral study requires vastly different intellectual and psychological demands than any other level of study (Hawley, 2010), but limited research explores how the online context influences these demands. Hawley (2010) depicted doctoral study as a "difficult metamorphosis from student to scholar in a largely indifferent, laissez-faire environment" (p.34). In addition, much of the research discusses the difficulties of VLE's, elaborated on in section 2.1, but limited research has connected the two ideas: of emotional and social challenges among online EdD students and VLE challenges. Because of the limited research, questioning whether or not the online context exacerbates the many challenges that doctoral students experience is a relevant concern. Adding the students' stories is expected to advance this discourse.

Davis (2014) stressed that limited research relates to doctoral students' engagement and actions within universities, as a result of their knowledge. As a majority of online EdD students work in universities, insights about the research gap that Davis (2014) specified could be addressed in this study. Moreover, the disconnection between theory and practice has been a major problem that has been explored in the literature, which is discussed further in section 2.4. Since the most central aim of online EdD study is to interrelate theoretical knowledge and professional practices (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015), analysing the online EdD students' stories is expected to contribute rich data about whether or not this aim is fulfilled. Lacking literature from the students' perspectives about their online EdD experiences exists, including whether or not theoretical knowledge was applied to improve professional practices.

2.7 Summary of Literature Review

This literature review has included a range of literature about VLE's, challenges for online students, quality and learning outcomes, disconnection between theory and professional practice, and transformative learning. Literature about VLEs centres on difficulties of establishing a supportive learning community in any form, as they relate to communities of inquiry, communities of practice, landscapes of practice, and communities of researchers. The literature provided detailed insights and diverse perspectives about the quality and learning outcomes among doctoral students. Defining theory and professional practice, as well as understanding the debates about their disconnection was offered. Lastly, a review of the literature about transformative learning was included, as transformative learning will provide an analytical lens to investigate the participants' stories. Gaps in the literature were explored and informed the formation of the research questions that will be presented in Chapter III.

Chapter III Methodology and Methods

Presented in this chapter will be how the research questions and aims were designed to address the identified gaps in Chapter II. A paradigm includes ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Scotland, 2012). In this chapter, the ontological and epistemological assumptions will be clarified in an attempt to justify why the methodology and methods were selected. Included in Chapter III is a discussion of each phenomenologically-informed phase and methods, data analysis techniques, ethical standards, reliability and trustworthiness of data, and critical reflexivity.

3.1 Research Aims and Questions

The research aims were discussed in the introduction already, but will be included here to further focus this chapter on how the methodological approach addressed the aims sufficiently. This study has two main research aims:

1. To investigate the impacts of the online EdD learning experiences and outcomes on the participants' personal and professional development through a phenomenologically-informed lens;
2. To advance the student voice about learning experiences in online EdD programmes.

These aims coherently align with the study's main inquiries that serve as the entire thesis focus. When writing these inquiries, particular attention was given to eliminating any assumptions that could manifest in the questions.

1. Do the online participants experience some forms of transformative learning during their EdD programme?
2. What are the factors that promote or hinder transformative learning?
3. What are the impacts of online EdD learning (or transformative learning if it occurs) on individuals' personal development and professional practices?

3.2 The Underpinning Ontology and Epistemology in This Study

Ontology is defined as the study of being and reality, and epistemology is the perspective about knowledge acquisition (Crotty, 2003; Mack, 2010). In this section, ontological and epistemological perspectives will be discussed transparently. An ontological belief that undergirds this study is that when researching the human experience in social science research, analysing how participants make meaning of their experiences is an integral part (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Within an interpretive, or interpretative, methodology, understanding how individuals construct meaning is an inherent facet (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivism's ontological perspective is relativism, which is the belief that reality is subjective (Scotland, 2012).

The issue of subjectivity is an important theme in all research. Researchers' observations even in the hard sciences could be viewed as subjective in terms of sense experiences (Husserl, 2008). The hard sciences refer to mathematics and sciences that integrate mathematics (e.g., chemistry and physics) (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Whereas researchers undertaking a positivist approach engage in large-scale studies to collect numeric data and measurements to generalize data (Mezirow, 1991), interpretivist researchers believe that social reality should be analysed through participants' perspectives (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Learning experiences are deeply complex and individualized and not generalizable, which is why, to interpretivists, a solely positivist approach may be rejected in the social sciences (Eagly & Riger, 2014). Positivism often incorporates mathematical models and correlations, which oversimplify the social context (O'Neill, 2016). "No model can include all of the real world's complexity or the nuance of human communication" (O'Neill, 2016, p. 20); thus, an interpretivist approach is taken in this study to analyse the complexities of learning experiences of the online EdD participants.

The epistemological branch that undergirds this study is social constructivism, which truly reflects my belief on how collaboration among individuals cultivates sense making (Creswell, 2009, 2013). Human progress and knowledge is advanced through social construction within a collaborative group; through considering different viewpoints, synthesizing diverse observations, building upon others' ideas, and finding solutions to practical problems; at the most basic level, human interaction is essential for survival (Tuomela, 2013). Human interaction has the potential to improve critical reflection, enhance self-awareness and deepen understanding of lifeworlds.

Embedded within the study design is the epistemological premise that students' subjective perceptions are valid and important to examine transformative learning and applications of

learning to professional practices; “The interpretive paradigm allows researchers to view the world through the perceptions and experiences of the participants” (Thanh & Thanh, 2015, p.24). How doctoral students reflect on and examine their learning experiences is meant to uphold a learner-centric, humanistic, social constructivist approach, validating each student’s perspectives. In this study, participants’ critical reflections, verbal responses, and reflective writings were explored to describe the complex social experiences and how they pertain to transformative learning. My ontological and epistemological views underpin the methodology and methods of this study to avoid contradictions, increase transparency, foster reliability and trustworthiness, and develop a reflexive approach to examining this study’s data. The next section will defend why Moustakas’s (1994) approach has been followed.

3.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is both a philosophical view and research methodology that has been applied to multiple disciplines: medicine, psychology, philosophy, and education research (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Gill, 2014; Luft & Overgaard, 2012; Sebbah, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Taipale, 2014; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013). Phenomenology may be defined as an examination of shared experiences, which is called the experiences’ essence, including participants’ interactions, motivations, feelings, perceptions, and behaviours (Moustakas, 1994). The main purpose of phenomenological research is to synthesize participants’ experiences, searching for commonalities to generate a phenomenon’s essence, also called the invariant structure (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Phenomenology, rather than other qualitative methodologies (Cresswell, 1998), was selected to inform this study because phenomenology enables researchers to evaluate participants’ points of view (Wang, 2007). Phenomenology also advocates for researchers to reflect on how individual positionality may influence data, when taking a critically reflexive approach (Basit, 2010, 2013). Wang (2007) explored Cresswell’s (1998) five methodologies that are suitable for qualitative research. Biography emphasizes understanding an individual’s life history; ethnography pertains to relations between behaviours and culture; phenomenology underscores participants’ viewpoints; grounded theory enables developing a theory from the collected field data, and case study means to study single or multiple cases in-depth (Cresswell, 1998; Wang, 2007).

Phenomenology is an effective philosophy to draw from to examine the human experience through reflective examination (Husserl, 2008; van Manen, 2014). When engaged in phenomenologically-informed research, researchers aim to understand how the participants think and feel (Vagle, 2014). Phenomenology's purpose, embedded within the interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), is not to produce definitive outcomes that may be generalized to all human beings (as is aimed for in a positivist approach); but to cultivate meaning, potentialities, and insights, presenting philosophical inquiries (van Manen, 2014). A practical phenomenology is not focused on the technical aspects of experience but rather cultivates an "embodied ontology, epistemology, and axiology of thoughtful and tactful action" (van Manen, 2014, p. 15). The phenomenological text expresses detailed stories, qualitative meanings, and practical actions with better thoughtfulness (van Manen, 2014), which is aimed for in this research.

To be perfectly clear, the intention in this study is not to do phenomenology but rather to use phenomenology as a guide to inform the interpretive/interpretative methodological approach. An interpretive belief that this study upholds is because the individual constructs his or her reality that "there are as many realities as individuals" (Scotland, 2012, p. 11). A central objective of interpretivism is to bring into focus concealed social structures and influences (Scotland, 2012), and an interpretive assumption is that the researcher should examine the world through the participants' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Doing so is important, particularly for teachers, because how students' experience or perceive learning is true to them and influences whether or not and how they learn. Even though each student may have a very different perception of the learning environment and teaching, a teacher should view each student's perceptions as relevant: if a student believes that the teacher does not like him or her or is a racist, for examples, the student may have much difficulty learning from that teacher or even attending the class. Thus, whether or not the student's perception is correct from the teacher's perspective, the teacher listens to the student's concerns, perceives the student's viewpoint, and strives to improve the relationship between student and teacher. The student's perceptions may even draw the teacher's focus to some microaggressions or actions that the teacher did not realise, thereby leading to the teacher's reflections and change in mannerisms, behaviours, or various practices that the student has called into question. This example also is relevant for researchers who believe the interpretivist assumption that individuals construct their reality and that understanding a

phenomenon through the participant's perspective is relevant, since reality and perception are intertwined in the social science field.

Moustakas's (1994) book was selected to guide this study because he outlines the philosophical history of phenomenology, as well as presents a detailed, practical guide for how to engage in phenomenologically-informed research. Phenomenology has several branches, and transcendental phenomenology informed this study because of its emphasis on removing researcher biases. Another valuable reason to engage in transcendental phenomenologically-informed research is because it leads to true knowledge and self-knowledge: "It is a rational path—knowledge that emerges from a transcendental or pure ego, a person who is open to see what is, just as it is, and to explicate what is in its own terms" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). What is education if not striving to find the absolute truth, a way to view the world without ideological blindness and prejudice, a method to become more aware of one's own experiences and meanings? Similar to Moustakas's (1994) viewpoint, I also believe that truth may be uncovered through the transcendental phenomenology guide that ultimately inspires reflections, personal agency, imagination, and understanding.

3.3.1 Transcendental phenomenology

With transcendental phenomenology, the researcher brackets out personal experiences of the investigated phenomenon to limit biases and better examine the participants' experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Campbell, 2011; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Heidegger argued that humans could not completely remove their biases, assumptions, experiences, and conditioning, whereas Husserl believed that humans could engage in the *Epoche* but not in a perfect way (Moustakas, 1994). A more in-depth discussion of the *Epoche* follows in the subsequent section (3.3.2). Throughout this study, critical reflection on conscious assumptions, biases, and experiences was undertaken to remove them as much as possible from the data analysis and collection process.

In addition to the reasons stated above in section 3.3, Moustakas's (1994) guide for how to conduct transcendental phenomenological research was followed because the steps, outlines, and examples are thorough and well-established. To maintain methodological consistency, I adhered to Moustakas's (1994) detailed research design and specific suggestions, which is expected to ensure a level of reliability. The main four phases of transcendental phenomenology are the

Epoche, Transcendental-Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis of Meaning and Essences, which will be explored in further detail in the subsequent sections. Though participants in a phenomenological study are called co-researchers and participants, this thesis will include the term ‘participant’ to provide terminology consistency.

3.3.2 Phase one: Epoche

Epoche originated from a Greek word that means ‘to stay away from or abstain’. The Epoche is a process where human consciousness is unfettered by others’ views. During the Epoche, the eight semi-structured interviews were conducted without preconceived judgments, but rather an openness to understand individual experiences. Bracketing connotes silence to understand the subjective nature of behaviours (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Essentially, I abstained from applying my preconceived assumptions and judgements, thereby approaching the phenomenon with open mindedness. The Epoche may begin before the data collection and is described as self-opening or reflective-meditation (Moustakas, 1994). During the Epoche, the world is bracketed, and my experiences throughout the online EdD programme were removed to have a more neutral view. I critically reflected on biases and assumptions about the online EdD programme by engaging in journal writing, meditation, self-questioning, and dialogue. In the Epoche, the researcher “does not doubt everything—only the natural attitude, the biases of everyday knowledge, as a basis for truth and reality” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Doubt is what others consider scientific truth and a priori knowledge. This is not a post-truth idea but rather a research approach that enhances researcher neutrality. Some ideas or entities are viewed as not bracketable, such as subconscious perceptions and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). Nonetheless, journaling resulted in a fresh perspective in preparation to collect data and analyse the phenomenon.

During the data collection, I viewed each statement as equally important, in accordance with phenomenological research guidelines (Moustakas, 1994). Although I had difficulty bracketing out my personal involvement in the experiences, doing so was possible through closely analysing the participants’ statements. Whilst critically reflecting on views, my perspectives were expected to change and become more discerning and truthful. Personal assumptions or biases pertained to the idea that online learning is advantageous for establishing global educational equality. Other assumptions were that transformative learning is beneficial and that virtual communities of practice could form among diverse students. I engaged in data analysis several

times and reflected on specific words, phrases, and responses to each question. I coded and analysed the data many times to check and recheck themes and sub-themes. Removing researcher biases permitted me to perceive each participant's experience and the totality or essence of the learning experience. This part of the phenomenologically-informed process involved empathy; only by entering the participants' worlds and perceiving their perspectives could there be an analytical understanding.

3.3.3 Phase two: Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction

Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction relates to personal experience and is used to reveal the ego. During this phase, I reduced the phenomenon's description and determined the essential attributes of the studied phenomenon. I wrote about the invariant constituents in a journal and as annotations on the verbatim transcriptions. During this stage, I reflected further on the connection or interconnectedness between self and phenomenon. This second phase was a continuous process of looking again at the phenomenon and describing it, then repeating this process for an extended amount of time. I described the phenomenon based on textural descriptions (the interview transcripts and documents); textural descriptions are compared to intensities, and I analogized various details of the data. An intensity juxtaposition example is hot vs. cold; in relation to this study, tangible impact on personal development and professional practices described in extensive detail versus limited description of impact on personal development and professional practices. I listened and assessed the phenomenon, in order to decipher significant details that pertained to all of the participants' stories, which increased data familiarity.

Again, I reflected when re-evaluating the phenomenon. In my experience, finding the themes and purposes, then analysing textual details (words, phrases, paragraphs) and their significance in depicting the overall themes and purposes, was analogous to close reading knowledge that I transferred to this study. As I continued to reflect and review specific details within the transcriptions, I again tried to view the experience's totality. This continual process of close reading and interpreting meaning to understand the participant's experience increased my understanding of the data. New discoveries were made as I reviewed the detailed responses of the participants. Phase two is analogized to finding layers of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

During the second phase, horizontalization began. Horizontalization refers to searching for repeated and overlapping comments among the participants. After I determined the presence of

repetitive words and expressions, I began to interpret. A main part of this stage was my identification of overlapping comments that were minimized to arrive at the “textural meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). During the horizontalization process, analysed are “things that exist in the world from the vantage point of self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). At the end of this phase, essential characteristics, or the experience’s horizons, are determined. The horizons were then changed into themes.

3.3.4 Phase three: Imaginative Variation

In the Imaginative Variation phase, I found meanings, imagined various possibilities, made inferences, and interpreted the experience. The four steps included: (a) Deciphering structural meanings; (b) Pinpointing underlying themes; (c) Contemplating universal structures, and (d) Finding paradigmatic examples that demonstrate the themes (Moustakas, 1994). Engagement in the discursive process of reading, reflecting, writing, and imagining underpins this phase. During this time, the imagination involves “varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals...” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Making inferences and searching for underlying causes and reasons why participants perceived their experiences in the ways that they described is continued through closely reading the transcriptions to examine meaning and the significance of each description.

I asked how and why certain experiences (e.g., reflective assignments and learning logs) seemed negative or positive to the participants. For example, why did one participant say that she did not feel that her self-esteem improved yet described how she felt that her enhanced capacity helped her to make better sense of her experiences? I examined contradictions among the responses and posed innumerable questions about the participants’ descriptions to deconstruct meaning and interpret the transcriptions. At this point, the experience’s essential structures were described. Describing these essential structures involved synthesis, taking the many pieces of data to form a whole. The synthesis process involved making inferences, engaging intuition, and participating in reflexivity.

3.3.5 Phase four: Synthesis of Meanings and Essences

Moustakas (1994) expressed that the synthesis of meanings and essences is the fourth and final stage of the transcendental phenomenological approach that includes a further “synthesis of

meanings and essences” (p. 100). I synthesized the textural and structural depictions to assess the experience’s essence further and confirm or reject my previous interpretations. During this phase, I again checked and rechecked the transcriptions and reflective documents to reorganize themes. I also determined that the four phenomenological steps were not only chronological but recursive. When synthesizing the meanings, reflecting again on biases and assumptions is important, which is enacted during the Epoche. When synthesizing the experiences, I located quotes from each participant to provide evidence of the themes and sub-themes. In conclusion, this four-phase process is described in the literature as rigorous, and the themes and sub-themes were validated with participants’ statements, found in Chapter IV and Appendix D. Next, the qualitative research methods that were selected in alignment with the research methodology will be discussed.

3.4 Qualitative Research Methods

In research studies, the research methodology is interrelated to the methods, which are the data collection and analysis procedures. Methods are the strategies and mediums used to collect the information, such as observation, experimentation, and analysis (Sahu, 2013). An audit trail to increase validity is indicative of qualitative research and an alternate type of rigour when compared to quantitative research that reveres a replicable research design and result universality (Hammersley, 2011). Qualitative research methods align with the interpretive methodology and offer alternative tools to understand the complexities of human experience: social interactions and personal motivations, feelings, perceptions, and behaviours.

3.4.1 Data collection process

The data collection methods in this study began with a purposive sampling technique, then eight semi-structured interviews and document collection. Before collecting any data, expedited ethical approval was attained. Proof of ethics approval is included in Appendix G. The university requires documentation that was completed, in compliance with the university’s ethical review process.

3.4.2 Purposive sampling

During qualitative data collection, four main concerns (sampling threats) to validity were contemplated. Primary sampling is particularly relevant when the researcher cannot observe the participants directly (Creswell, 2009). Primary sampling concerns included (a) forming clear

guidelines about who to include and exclude; (b) selecting a well-chosen sample size, given the methodology and various considerations; (c) choosing the best sample strategy to address the research questions; and (d) reflecting on any ethical concerns related to the sample sources – incentivizing (Robinson, 2014). I informed participants that they had the right to withdraw from the research study at any time and would not be coerced to continue participating, in accordance with ethical standards (British Educational Research Association, 2011). Furthermore, I contemplated suggested sample size ranges for a phenomenologically-informed study, and small sample sizes are acceptable.

Purposive sampling is viewed as homogeneous sampling that provides in-depth information, or rich data, about the phenomenon being examined (Suri, 2011). The purposive sampling strategy, or judgement sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), ensured that participants had met certain criteria: participated in an online EdD programme and completed a minimum of one module in the programme. The definition of transformative learning is provided in the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix A) for the participants' information. Despite clear transformative learning definitions, varied perceptions about transformative learning exist, which is why analysing the online EdD participants' responses by using the transformative learning theory as a guide was enacted. Although the participants said they felt that they had experienced transformative learning, these were personal perceptions. Because collecting what some may deem solid evidence proof (such as taking a survey) is a more quantitative, not a qualitative, approach, collecting the participants' stories and analysing them through the transformative learning lens led to a deeper understanding of the online EdD phenomenon.

3.4.3 Interviews

The interview is the most common qualitative data collection method among social science researchers, and the “phenomenological interview” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114) was used in this study. With qualitative data collection, interviews are particularly relevant when the researcher cannot observe the participants directly (Creswell, 2009). Skype interviews have become increasingly important in data collection and educational research (Janghorban, 2014). Although various ethical considerations have arisen from online interview methods, which include marginalizing participants without the technology needed to participate in the study, many researchers have acknowledged the benefits of the online interview method. For instances, with

online interviews, researcher presence bias is mitigated and traveling costs are eliminated (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Researcher presence bias is the idea that researchers' presences influence the participants' responses. For instance, if the participants feel uncomfortable around the researcher, they may not completely disclose all of the information that they would in writing or in an online setting. Because all participants lived in different countries at the time of the interviews, directly observing the participants and engaging in face-to-face interviews was not an option.

Nine pre-interviews that contained five questions enabled me to confirm that all of the participants met the study requirements. Participants were given the option of answering the five questions via Skype or in written format, but none of the pre-interview data were part of the data analysis process. One of the prospective participants withdrew after the pre-interview and before signing any documentation. Other possible participants responded to the email to participate, but each one was informed that enough participants for the study had volunteered yet contact would be made if a participant withdrew. A main benefit of the pre-interview is that the technology could be tested. Finding out whether or not Skype worked both ways was important. Another benefit is that some rapport with the participants could be established. As a result of the pre-interview, I could reflect on responses prior to the formal interview that may allow me to form follow-up questions. Pre-interviews are similar to pilot interviews, and pilot interviews often foreshadow various inquiries and problems, yet they are not well-examined and often misunderstood (Sampson, 2004). Pilot interviews can benefit all qualitative studies, and ultimately, "pilots are invaluable as introductions to unknown worlds" (Sampson, 2004, p. 399). As researchers aim to remove any prior assumptions and judgements, they try to enter the participants' unknown lifeworlds in the pre-interview, just as in the pilot interview. The pre-interview foreshadowed issues that participants would discuss in their interviews and had written in their documents.

Prior to the interview, I reviewed specific suggestions for how to conduct the phenomenological interview. Frequently, the "phenomenological interview begins with a social conversation...aimed at creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 114). I determined that engaging in an initial brief discussion may seem purposeless, superficial, and contrived. Some participants did not want to engage in the friendly discussion but insisted that I begin with the real interview questions. For example, one participant informed me that he had a meeting scheduled in 45 minutes so would not be able to engage in an entire hour interview. He

told me to begin with the interview questions immediately and asked that additional questions be emailed.

Before beginning the interview, I created an interview protocol (Appendix C) and practiced interview techniques. Although I initially developed a structure for the interview through the interview questions, I asked a variety of follow-up questions to provide more in-depth information. Thus, the interviews were not entirely structured, though I was able to ask all of the questions that I had planned to ask. Researchers should use a flexible script, ask open-ended questions, include easier to answer questions first, and adjust the questions as needed to collect quality data (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The important communication skills and nuances associated with asking follow-up questions, offering reflective statements, and providing personal input were all issues that I reflected on before and during the interview process. The researcher is expected to be personable but also to not ask too many questions, demonstrating silence to allow the participants time to gather their thoughts and proceed with the narrative: “Do not be afraid of silences” (van Manen, 2014, p. 316).

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour and was conducted on Skype. I gave participants the choice between turning the camera feature on Skype on or off. Interviews were not video recorded, which aligned with ethical standards. The MP3 Skype recorder made audio recordings of each interview and verbatim transcriptions were made afterward. Focus on punctuation, fillers, tone, and pauses are important to note when transcribing interviews (Powers, 2005). I listened to the interview audio recordings many times to check and recheck transcriptions for accuracy. Transcribing each hour-long interview took approximately 5-7 hours. When writing the transcriptions, challenges were when participants changed subjects or had foreign accents that made what they said difficult for me to understand. Electronic static interfered, occasionally, with understanding what participants said, making responses take a longer time to decipher.

Asking questions about the participants’ professional roles was a beneficial, non-threatening way to begin the interview. The interviews were scheduled as soon after the pre-interviews as possible, after gaining participants’ informed consent and completing all of the required documentation that the Ethical Review Committee requested. Less than a month passed between the pre-interviews and formal interviews. In the interviews, a sensitivity to the willingness of participants to share personal stories was important. Mitigating any issues about how much to question presented another issue. Although I wanted for the participants to provide in-depth stories

with concrete details, asking too many follow-up questions may have been considered coercive. All of the participants provided follow-up responses when prompted and did not appear uncomfortable at any time during the interview.

3.4.4 Document collection

Documents provided an additional data source and enabled data triangulation, which is a strategy among qualitative researchers to improve data reliability and validity (Denzin, 1970; Stake, 1995). Eliminating transcription time and offering a more reflective, accurate response from participants were some benefits of document collection (Creswell, 2009). Documents from the EdD programme (e.g., the EdD handbook, Postgraduate Research Code of Practice, and policies) were collected. Specific information about the module course requirements and participant expectations were in the policy documents, enabling a better understanding of the programme and contextualization of the participants' responses. Acceptable documents that I asked participants to email included reflective assignments and learning logs from the doctoral development plan (DDP) modules, thesis preparation assignments, and any other formal assignments from the EdD modules. Four participants shared documents. These documents offered rich data that supplemented the interview transcripts, which was a valuable data source to include in the interpretations. The documents provided reflective, in-depth accounts of the EdD participants' experiences. Participants' documents contained information about researchable issues that related to applying knowledge to the professional context that led to personal development and improved professional practices. Other topics presented were reflections on the inherent themes of personal skill development, perspective change, and social factors. To emphasize, having two different data sources enhanced the research validity. I used the same data analysis techniques (Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) step-by-step method) to analyse both the interview transcripts and documents. Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) step-by-step data analysis method will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis refers to how the researcher interprets data. Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) phenomenological analysis techniques that provided seven clear steps to analyse the data was used.

3.5.1 Phenomenological data analysis

Moustakas's (1994) adapted version of Van Kaam's (1959, 1966) analytical method are written verbatim from Moustakas's (1994) book:

1. Listing and Preliminary Grouping
2. Reduction and Elimination
3. Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents
4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation
5. Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher an Individual Textural Description of the Experience
6. Construct for each co-researcher an Individual Structural Description...
7. Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description of the meanings and essences of the experience.... (See page 120-121 in Moustakas, 1994, if further information is needed).

Each step was followed to enhance the study's rigour, validity, and reliability. Moustakas's (1994) step-by-step guide is especially beneficial for an inexperienced researcher (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). I have provided further evidence of how I applied each step in Appendix D. Further evidence of each theme is offered in Appendix E.

Reviewing and revising the themes several times was necessary. Verbatim quotes for each meaning unit or theme were provided to verify the data analysis. Synthesizing the eight stories and constructing a "textural-structural description of the meanings and essences" (p. 122) is the seventh step in the phenomenological analysis that allowed the writing of a "universal description of the experience...." (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). The universal description is considered the experience's essence and the expected outcome after the phenomenological analysis process.

In qualitative analysis, saturation should be reached to improve research quality, and saturation refers to when the researcher has collected sufficient data to replicate the study, received any additional needed data, and completed all feasible coding (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Saturation was reached in the sense that further coding was no longer feasible and had been completed, but the purpose of this phenomenologically-informed study is not to collect enough information to replicate the study. I do not know if any of the themes would be replicable among online EdD

students in another programme, and this could be seen as a limitation in my research that could be addressed in a future study.

3.6 Ethical Code of Excellence

Upholding an ethical code of “excellence” is mandatory for doctoral researchers. Each participant’s well-being was at the forefront of the research project and took precedence over any other concerns. Specific ethical standards were applied and will be discussed in the subsequent section.

3.6.1 Ethical dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas may arise at all stages of the research project (Creswell, 2009). Various associations and organizations have a Code of Ethics (e.g., Ethical Standards of the American Educational Research Association) that researchers should uphold. In addition to adhering to various ethical codes, researchers should be reflective, empathetic, and flexible throughout the data collection to address the unique needs of the participants and uphold ethical standards that are specific to their projects (Creswell, 2009). The informed consent process and participant confidentiality are ethical issues, discussed extensively throughout educational research literature (Girvan & Savage, 2012; Walker, 2007). Beneficence and non-maleficence are ethical principles and allude to doing no harm to the participants (Walker, 2007). The research benefits should outweigh the costs, and the researcher should never disregard participants’ well-being.

At the study’s inception, I did not fully imagine how recounting transformative learning experiences could pose any risk or do harm to participants. Although the data collection did not harm participants, I became more aware of the issue of participant vulnerability. Being sensitive to participants’ emotions and willingness to elaborate was a practice employed. All of the participants willingly shared their personal stories and upheld responsibilities outlined in the Participant Consent Form. When participants described and relived challenging experiences, disorienting dilemmas, in the EdD programme, these relived moments could have caused discomfort; however, no participant mentioned experiencing discomfort. These uncomfortable moments could have arisen when participants discussed dealing with learning team members’ criticisms, not having enough time to put forth best efforts, and feeling academically inadequate, and therefore insecure. Reflecting and empathizing with participants’ feelings took precedence over continued questioning, which aligned with ethical standards.

An email invitation to all EdD participants was sent, which gave prospective participants time to contemplate whether or not they wanted to participate. With email invitations, participants may not feel coerced to respond, as they would in face-to-face settings. The participants read through a detailed Participant Information Sheet and signed a Participant Consent Form. Participant Information Sheets should include extensive information about the study's objectives, aims, research questions, and significance. The Participant Consent Form detailed the participants' rights (e.g., voluntary withdrawal with no penalty) and responsibilities. Participants were well-aware of how much time that their participation would require before deciding to participate.

During the data analysis, I was obliged to consider how to protect participants' anonymity, which is why pseudonyms were used. The institution's name is anonymised to protect the institution and participants' identities. The participants' biographical profiles, in the next chapter, provide specific yet general information so that identities will not be known. I will keep all audio recordings and transcriptions for five to ten years on a hard drive in a locked file cabinet (when not in use).

Another ethical concern that required reflection was how to represent participants' stories and responses in a balanced and accurate way. When interpreting the data, various validation strategies to ensure accuracy were enacted (Creswell, 2009). Including details and verbatim quotes to support each theme and providing a balanced written account that represented all data well were key considerations. Spending a prolonged time re-reading and reflecting on the transcripts and data analysis process strengthened the validity of this study.

3.6.2 Concerns about reliability, trustworthiness, and reflexivity

In this section, concerns related to reliability, trustworthiness, and reflexivity during the research process will be discussed. Reliability relates to study replicability, or reproducing the same results, often called saturation in the literature (Fusch & Ness, 2015), and trustworthiness refers to researcher ethics, competence, and credibility. Although Fusch and Ness (2015) described reliability in terms of replicability, a phenomenologically-informed research aim is to study a phenomenon that may have been researched before but finds original and typically irreproducible results (van Manen, 2014). Methods that were used to address reliability and trustworthiness in this phenomenologically-informed study were reflecting on the study, writing reflections, providing verbatim evidence of the analysis and data, and being transparent about the research

process. Other methods applied to this study included checking transcripts, comparing data with codes, triangulating data sources, describing findings and supporting them with quotes, reflecting on personal biases, among others (Creswell, 2009). I have presented this study twice, at different phases of the research process, to the audience within my research community. The feedback gained from others helped me to reflect on the process of data collection and analysis, as well as the data interpretation. Throughout this project, I reflected on ethical considerations, various dilemmas and how to mitigate them, as outlined in the literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; British Educational Research Association, 2011; Creswell, 2009; Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Enacting reflexivity is relevant at every stage of the research process, in order to improve reliability and trustworthiness (Basit, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1989), which is why questioning and reflecting on biases and assumptions was completed (discussed in section 3.3.2, the *Epoche* phase). A reflexive research approach means that researchers reflect on each decision, each question, and each action, learning from the research experience itself. Introspection, dialogue, reflections, and experiences encourage reflexivity and often help researchers to learn and grow professionally as a result (Zinn, Adam, Kurup, & du Plessis, 2016). Kahn (2015) concluded that “The reflexive basis for pedagogic research and for higher education emerged strongly...” (p. 452). Whilst reflexivity is relevant to reflect personal biases and assumptions that influence research, reflexivity also may improve relational aspects of research: improving the rapport between researcher and participant, upholding ethical values when interacting with participants, and listening and reflecting on participants’ statements to advance trustworthiness and reliability.

3.7 Conclusion

Purposes of this chapter were to review personal ontology and epistemology, detailing how they led to a phenomenologically-informed study. Transparently offered were the step-by-step process of this study’s methods of interview and document collection, as well as the analytical techniques employed. Ethical and qualitative research concerns were addressed, emphasizing the relevance of reflexivity throughout the course of the research study, in terms of questioning research choices and personal assumptions, as well as analysing the data. Chapter IV presents the research findings, including an analysis of the themes and sub-themes and participants’ quotes to support them.

Chapter IV Presentation of Findings

Chapter IV presents the research findings that were collected from eight semi-structured interviews and various reflective assignments and organizational documents from the investigated university. Policy documents, handbooks, and other university materials enabled a better understanding of the online EdD programme context and situated the participants' responses within the given context. The presentation of findings chapter first discusses the participants' profiles to offer demographic and professional background information. Presented after is a discussion of the main themes and sub-themes that developed from the data analysis.

4.1 Interview Participants' Profiles

Interviewed were a total of eight participants: four women and four men of different ages, nationalities, and professional backgrounds. Participants had held a variety of professional roles, such as professors, administrators, and advisors. Three of the eight participants were unemployed at the time of the interview, but all but one participant had worked during a minimum of one module. Despite the participants' diversity, nationality and country of residence were not stipulations to participate in the study. Participants also were at different stages of the online EdD programme, with some participants being in the thesis stage, whilst one participant had recently completed module 1.

Participants are referred to by pseudonyms: Benjamin, Mira, Maximillian, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna, Bree, and Alex. These names have no relationship to the participants' original names but were selected randomly and with respect to each participant's country of origin and gender. Each participant's pseudonym, current profession, country of origin, gender, and EdD stage are provided in Table 4.1. Further participant information is included to highlight the diversity among the participants and provide biographical information about them. Profiles are vague to protect participant anonymity.

Table 4.1

Bibliographic Information about Study Participants

Pseudonym	Current profession	Country of origin	Gender	EdD stage
Benjamin	Unemployed, was working as a senior administrator in various HEs	France	Male	Thesis stage
Mira	Associate professor in medicine	Malaysia	Female	Thesis stage
Maximillian	Policy advisor	Austria	Male	Thesis stage
Kaitlyn	Academic Coordinator	Scotland	Female	Thesis stage
Vincent	Principal	Canada	Male	Module 3 completed
Brianna	Psychologist	UK	Female	Thesis stage
Bree	Considers herself unemployed but gives private music lessons	Remote island off West coast of UK	Female	Module 9

Alex	Unemployed, but previously working as an English as a Second Language instructor	Canada	Male	Module 1 completed
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Benjamin

Benjamin was born in France and is in his late forties. Holding an advanced degree, Benjamin has decades of educational and professional experience in leadership and administrative positions at HEI's in France and numerous other European countries. Benjamin has held prestigious positions as Director, Vice President, and Chief Executive Officer in prestigious institutions. At the time of the formal interview, he was not employed. Benjamin noted that he has been working on his EdD thesis full-time and plans to earn his doctorate degree soon.

Mira

Mira is an Associate Professor in Malaysia and a member of a prominent medical association, council, and exam unit. Holding several advanced degrees in the medical field, Mira has decades of educational and professional experience. She teaches subjects related to healthcare and offers various healthcare services in her community. In the thesis stage of the EdD programme, Mira was engaging in her research project at the time of the interview.

Maximilian

Maximilian originated from and resides in Austria, where he serves as a policy advisor for research, infrastructure, and site management at a university. Serving in various professional roles, Maximilian has been a teacher, Assistant Principal, Director, and advisor. He holds an advanced degree and currently is in the thesis stage of the EdD programme. Maximilian participates in various international conferences and seminars throughout Europe.

Kaitlyn

Although from Scotland, Kaitlyn has resided in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for approximately two decades, where she serves as a professor and coordinator at a HEI. She has been employed as an educational professional since the early 1980's, holding numerous teaching and leadership positions. Various professional roles that Kaitlyn has held include lecturer, senior lecturer, teacher, teacher trainer, curriculum designer, curriculum planner, curriculum developer, and independent learning facilitator. She currently is in the thesis stage of the EdD programme.

Vincent

Vincent was born in Canada and currently serves as the Principal at a Canadian school that has 300 students and 30 staff members. He has been an educator for a decade and an administrator for six years. His professional responsibilities include building and site management, organizational learning, and instructional leadership. Vincent holds two bachelors' degrees, and a Master's in Leadership. At the time of the interview, Vincent had completed module 3 of the EdD programme.

Brianna

Brianna resides in Bahrain and serves as a psychologist and program manager at a prestigious HEI. Brianna holds a master's degree in social science and is in the thesis stage of the EdD programme. She is respected at the international level and well-established in her career. Brianna has participated in various international conferences and published articles in a number of scholarly journals.

Bree

Bree has resided in Switzerland for two years and lives on a remote island off the west coast of the UK. She holds a master of arts degree in music pedagogy and is a music teacher. She is a harpist, organist, pianist, singer, conductor and solfege professor. Bree once owned her own music school in the UK until her husband obtained a position as Managing Director of a financial company and was relocated to Switzerland. Although Bree now teaches choir and various instruments at the local church, she does not consider herself employed. However, she offers

implementable professional counsel to her husband for his company, based on her learning and research from the EdD programme.

Alex

At the time of the pre-interview, Alex had recently moved to Brazil from Japan, where he had been an English as a Second Language (ESL) professor. Alex was not employed at the time of the formal interview. Alex holds masters' degrees in Philosophy and English. At the time of the interview, he had completed only one module in the EdD programme and plans to continue with his studies. In the future, Alex aims to open his own ESL school.

4.2 Main Research Findings

When thematically analysing the interview transcripts and documents, three themes emerged (a) personal skill development; (b) perspective change; and (c) social factors. Using the phenomenological data analysis technique, detailed in Chapter III, the evident invariant constituents and subsequent themes were determined. In this study, themes and sub-themes are the terms that will be used to present the data findings, instead of invariant constituents. The main themes offered an overall conceptualization of the participants' experiences, and specific sub-themes within each main theme were examined. Applicable ideas that were related to each sub-theme were analysed; additional quotes to support the themes and also to convey further the participants' stories are included in this chapter and Appendix E. The ultimate aim of the phenomenological data analysis techniques is to "develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). Although a number of anomalous responses are discussed, the themes and sub-themes represent the Composite Description of the participants' experiences. The next section 4.3 presents the first main theme from the findings: personal skill development.

4.3 Personal Skill Development

Personal skill development is a process of personal improvement that takes a significant amount of time and effort to cultivate; evidence of personal skill development includes improved actions for a desired outcome, which often coincides with enhanced self-awareness. Critical reflection, critical thinking, and time management skills take time and deliberate effort to advance, and participants described how strengthening these skills led to their personal skill development,

in terms of more competent professional practices. The sub-themes related to personal skill development were: (a) critical reflection; (b) critical thinking skills; and (c) time management.

4.3.1 Critical reflection

Critical reflection is the in-depth analysis of conditioned beliefs that pertain to assumptions, culture, and ideologies that have been accepted as true (Mezirow, 1991) and is related to examining how power structures shape practices (Brookfield, 2012, 2015a, 2015b). Critical reflection is associated with the cognitive, rational processes of transformative learning but has a close connection to social critique. Participants viewed critical reflection as invaluable but expressed how time consuming it was, which contributed to time management problems. Time management issues deeply influenced participants' lives and will be discussed in section 4.3.3. A main difference among participants was the medium in which they preferred to reflect critically. Although some participants preferred to write in a journal to foster critical reflection, others valued discussing their reflective writings with their doctoral tutors, engaging in artistic projects, and contextualizing reflections in practice.

Half of the participants conveyed that reflection had not been part of their former education; although the participants, as well-established professionals, presumably had reflected critically before, the fundamental point they made was that they never had to complete a written reflective assignment as a course requirement. Doing so typically led to epistemological shifts about the significance of critical reflection in education and practice. Benjamin expressed that in his traditional culture that students do not explain feelings or personal situations to a supervisor.

“In my own traditional culture, it’s not really frequent to open up to even a supervisor and explain the kinds of feelings you’re going through or the personal situation you’re going through and how that may impact your learning....And I’ve changed my mind with the reflectivity that is required....Because that really insists on the necessity for you to think about what you’re doing and why you’re doing this kind of degree, and also reflecting on what you’re doing on your own professional position.”

Though Brianna said that her beliefs did not change as a result of participation, she maintained that online learning enabled development of reflexivity that allowed for better self-

understanding, associated with a deepened self-awareness, which is a transformative learning outcome. Other positive comments about the reflective assignments were that they facilitated thinking and prepared Maximilian for the thesis stage. Mira noted that the learning logs encouraged reflection on learning and enabled her to notice how her thinking had transformed throughout the module (deepened self-awareness). Moreover, Benjamin, wrote in his reflective assignment that the module made him reflect on necessary changes in his professional organization to cultivate a “powerful learning environment” and tools to analyse his plans to do so.

Vincent, a Principal, gave teachers exit interviews for the first time, which he said was a result of his critical reflection. The exit interviews aimed to assist teachers to reflect more on their time at his school and pinpoint any challenges, strengths, and improvements that could be made. The learning logs were very useful to foster his critical reflection because they were supposed to be completed during each week of the module.

“The learning log was more useful because it actually forced me intermittently throughout that module to look and reflect. And again, as I said, it was useful to meet with the doctoral tutor because, as I said, it was more purposeful.”

Similar to Vincent, Kaitlyn felt that the interactive dialogue with the doctoral tutor encouraged critical reflection more than the written responses. Kaitlyn reflected that

“When I did the Skype tutorial with my DDP tutor, I found that much more of a reflective experience than actually writing these assignments. I felt with the assignments, I was going through the process because I had to but not really reflecting on what I had learned.”

In Kaitlyn’s reflective writing, she wrote that

“If assumptions are unchallenged, then the potential for constructing new perspectives is lost, so examining experiences critically should be the basis of any process of exploring one’s learning.”

Some participants promoted suggestions about the critical reflections. Bree advocated for team reflections, which she described as a dialogic conversation among her peers and doctoral tutors. Bree also wanted for the reflections to incorporate more than written responses but an art-based approach, which she said would be more personally meaningful. Brianna suggested that the reflective assignments and learning logs should “be meshed.”

Brianna explained that the critical reflection process in the learning and action research modules influenced her practice and made her more ethical. Brianna had reflected critically on what she referred to as an ethnocentric way of teaching and developing a curriculum. As a result, she developed a curriculum that was more culturally responsive to her students’ needs in Bahrain. She said that without certain modules that she would not have critically reflected on variables that could improve how she adapted to students’ learning needs.

Participants’ increased awareness of learning throughout the module and making meaning of the learning experiences insinuated the value of critical reflection.

"I did begin to move toward a more self-reflexive/reflective approach.... In terms of critical thought and its connection to educational practice, as Dr. Anderson suggests, we have to be critical and reflect when adopting and applying theoretical models in our practice" (Alex).

Enhanced self-awareness of personal strengths and challenges, in relation to participants’ learning in the module and/or actions within the professional context, was a commonality among participants. Participants viewed critical reflection as an integral component of the online EdD and necessary for their personal development. Taking the form of learning that could be applied to practice and make participants more competent practitioners were the result of critical reflection.

4.3.2 Critical thinking skills

Critical reflection is a necessary learning task in the critical thinking process yet each is a distinct skill. Critical thinking, defined as the ability to propose and implement the most effective solutions to resolve a complex problem, integrates critiques of attitudes, actions, judgements, and ideologies (Barnett, 2015). The Critical Thinking Foundation (2013) provided the following critical thinking in-action indicators: (a) pose well-formed questions; (b) examine abstract

concepts and various sources to form solutions; (c) exhibit open-mindedness and examine diverse assumptions, ideas, and practices; and (d) communicate well with others to construct solutions to multi-faceted problems. The Critical Thinking Foundation (2013) also depicted critical thinking as a way to counteract sociocentric and egocentric ways of thinking in a self-corrective, self-directed, and self-disciplined manner. Critical thinking indicators were evident among all of the participants. The critical thinking sub-theme overlapped with social factors because through the social interaction and collaboration during the programme, participants developed critical thinking skills.

Maximillian mentioned contemplating multiple perspectives in the learning team, which is related to critical thinking indicator c, mentioned at the beginning of this section. When Maximillian discussed developing practical perspectives, he stated:

“it was a practice run for all these skills because I had to make comments that people made in the [Blackboard discussion forum] and have a practical view on them.”

The diversity within the EdD programme enhanced perspectives, and learning how to form a supportive learning community were indispensable to develop solutions to multifaceted, contextually-based questions. Doctoral participants had to feel comfortable giving and receiving each other's critical feedback, and questioning each other, which took trust building. Kaitlyn reflected that being part of a professional doctorate community was useful to her critical thinking skills because team members asked the “tough questions.” Asking tough questions corresponded to the critical thinking indicator of posing well-formed questions.

Kaitlyn related that studying at the doctoral level was very different and more demanding than expected. Fellow students were critical when analysing Kaitlyn's work, and to her, each discussion post was a public performance that added stress. The intense stress caused an incremental disorienting dilemma that compelled Kaitlyn to cultivate better critical thinking skills and to assess her work more often. Before posting whole class and team discussions, for all students and tutors to read and judge, Kaitlyn spent extra time making sure that her contributions demonstrated her best effort.

Another factor that influenced Kaitlyn's critical thinking skills was the necessity of finding answers without the presence of a tutor. She wrote about how the online versus face-to-face

learning experiences differed, and online learning promoted less dependency on the tutor and more self-directedness. Specifically, Kaitlyn wrote,

“I am becoming aware of the most apparent differences between online and face-to-face learning which is, in the absence of the physical presence of a tutor, as I encountered problems, I quickly learned to probe more and explore further to find the answers.”

Another specific example that underscored critical thinking skills occurred when Alex informed me that his enhanced critical thinking skills in the programme had merged into his daily conversations. Alex said that in the doctoral programme his learning team and doctoral student peers encouraged all topics to be open to criticism. The learning teams gave Alex what he described as “an outlet to apply critical thinking without fear of recrimination.” Alex wrote the following in his learning log:

“We have all pointed out that we have begun to think about things more critically through the insights of our peers.”

Learning teams offered a supportive space for doctoral participants to engage in critical discussions and develop their critical thinking skills.

Throughout Mira’s educational experiences in Malaysia, she stated that she had been expected to rely on lectures, textbooks, and rote memorization for the medical field. The reliance on instructors’ lectures hindered constructive sense making, critical thinking, and deep learning that often accompanies extensive, written, and critical reflection, she expressed.

“Critical thinking not only from the program but also from the difference from what our teachers had said before and what I [had] seen” (Mira).

4.3.3 Time management skills

Even though none of the interview questions were directly about time management, this issue was a relevant sub-theme to seven of the eight participants, based on the outcomes from the data analysis. Time management was very important to the interview participants because seven

of them held professional positions at some point during the programme and had multiple roles. Balancing their roles was deeply related to developing time management skills. Managing time well pertains to emotional well-being, and poor time management results in increased stress and pressure (Tracy, 2013). Online learning was more challenging, rigid, and strict in terms of time requirements than previously expected, and participants improved their time management skills throughout the EdD programme in order to continue the programme of study. Although time management may not seem related to transformative learning, it was a major source of participants' disorienting dilemmas, altering how they approached tasks and interacted with other individuals.

In an interview, Mira told the story of how she learnt to manage time by informing co-workers that she was busy, instead of engaging in "chit-chat." She related that many people in Malaysian culture have small talk that she participated in before the EdD programme. Now, she says let me finish my work, unless her co-workers have something important to discuss, making sure to prioritize tasks.

"So especially, time management, I have improved...I have realized some minor things we have to neglect."

In a reflective assignment, Benjamin disclosed that the program was too ambitious for full-time workers. Benjamin wrote that

"I wasn't using [the learning logs] as a reflective exercise, mainly because of lack of time. I'm sure I could've really reflected and learned from that process. But to be honest, I felt like I didn't have time to reflect properly..."

At the beginning of the EdD programme, Benjamin reported that it was difficult to complete the learning log because of wanting to spend the time on the module readings and assignments. Benjamin improved his time management skills throughout the years when he completed the taught modules.

Participants struggled with the frequency of interactions and deadlines. To be successful, all of the participants had to rise to the level of expectation among online EdD students. After synthesizing all responses, participants appeared to be grateful for the extremely high level of

rigour expected. The rigour cultivated strong academic habits and prepared participants for extremely demanding full-time professional work and doctoral studies. Time management was a source of disorientation that ultimately enabled the participants to develop expected skills of a doctoral student. The evidence that the participants had developed the expected skills of a doctoral student is because they passed the modules.

4.4 Perspective Change

Within the main theme of perspective change, or shifted worldview, emerged key sub-themes of disorientation, reintegration of new perspective, and self-concept. A changed perspective refers to assimilating a new idea or way to perceive experiences, self, others, or society. Although only three key themes are underscored because of their importance to this participant group, these themes comprise elements of all transformative learning stages (specified in section 2.5) of Mezirow's (1978, 1991) original theory.

4.4.1 Disorientation

Disorientation is defined as any adverse emotions and threatening experiences that stimulate a changed perspective (Mezirow, 2000, 2012). Perceiving a disorienting dilemma in new ways promotes the transformative process (Taylor & Elias, 2012). Furthermore, Willis (2012) depicted the disorientation as not only cognitive but having a broader meaning: "referring to the person's life stance, her way of being in the world—which becomes unstable" (p. 213). Participants expressed some form of disorientation that led to changed actions and transformative learning. Time management, the rigorous structure of the online curricular design, in-depth tutor feedback, and expectations of constant written responses were central sources of disorientation. To emphasize, because the participants had full-time careers and numerous personal responsibilities, time management was a substantial source of disorientation. Participants often questioned their preconceived assumptions and reflected on diverse beliefs, viewpoints, and values, which were other disorientation sources. In one of Kaitlyn's reflective assignments after module 1, she wrote that

"This learning experience has been intense; I have really been thrown out of my comfort zone. During these past few months I have learned skills that will underpin my progress for the duration of my doctorate."

Six participants ascertained various difficulties with adapting to tutors' and fellow peers' high academic expectations. Stress related to giving and receiving quality feedback caused disorientation. Alex disclosed that he believed that all EdD participants go through a process of insecurity, but he gained self-esteem and feelings of competence as he continued in the first module. For instance, Alex reflected that

"I think everyone goes through that process of insecurity. I felt insecure. You're impressed by the way your peers think, and the way they present their ideas. Makes you feel geez, maybe I can't do this."

Insecurities about written work quality compared to others' written work quality prompted disorientation, and this external validation is associated with a more traditional epistemology, associated with the socialized mind, rather than a self-authoring or self-transforming mind that depends on individuation and various other internal factors (Kegan, 2000, 2009).

"Some weeks, I found it overwhelming. Most weeks okay, but sometimes in modules, I thought, I'm never going to find a way through this" (Kaitlyn).

Linguistic differences created extra difficulties for Benjamin, Mira, and Maximillian because they were non-native English speakers, and they noted that their EdD studies were more time consuming as a result. Expressing and reading about complex philosophical concepts in English were challenging learning tasks. Doing so, however, altered their identity and professional role and had long-term benefits in terms of communicating with others internationally. These three participants explained that a positive outcome was improved English skills that were needed for conferences and various business meetings.

Benjamin conveyed the destruction of his tenuous work-life-academic balance. The readings were too dense (English was not Benjamin's first language), and he analogized his type of learning on the first few modules to surface learning. He wrote that he had to apologize often to team members for not having enough time to complete required tasks. Despite feeling comfortable with his time management skills when he decided to pursue the professional doctorate, Benjamin

suggested that he was not aware of how strong the commitment would be at the beginning of the programme.

“Almost every week, I had to struggle quite hard to find original ideas for the 3 required posts and this created a stress which I do not think was necessary to meet the objectives of the module.”

Vincent expressed that he decided to take a break from the programme to gain energy and prepare for the next module. It was particularly difficult for most participants to stay engaged in the learning team and whole class discussions because of time demands of full-time employment, programme rigidity, and high standards of doctoral tutors and peers. All of these disorientation examples ultimately led to personal development and perspective changes among most of the participants.

4.4.2 Reintegration of new perspective

The reintegration of new perspective sub-theme relates to stage 10 of the transformative learning process, and altered and reintegrated perspectives pertained to ideas about self-competence, social contexts, and abstract concepts. To overcome the disorientating dilemma, engaging in critical reflection, receiving others' support, implementing various strategies and actions, and improving confidence were necessary precursors.

Although each sub-theme has its particular focus, they were often interconnected. The disorientation sub-theme and reintegration of new perspective sub-theme were often spoken about within the same response. Although critical reflection and critical thinking led to disorientation, these skills eventually caused a deeper transformation, a changed perspective about professional roles. Time management and emotional responses were sources of disorientation, yet initiated a better self-concept and perspective reintegration. To prevail despite obstacles and succeed in the EdD programme, participants generated methods to cope, such as developing supportive relationships with others and enacting specific strategies to overcome linguistic, emotional, personal, contextual, and cultural challenges.

Mira provided a story about the contrast in how she once perceived the learning environment, as a secondary and undergraduate student, with how she began to view it, as a

graduate student, and even more differently, as a result of online EdD study. Mira mentioned that in Malaysia that questioning the tutor typically is not accepted, yet she required that her students ask her critical questions, as well as verify information with their electronic devices, as a result of her online EdD experiences. She stated that she wants her students to think critically because she now has a new perspective about how this is a valuable teaching practice.

In addition, when I asked Maximillian why he believed that the reflective assignments were valuable, he expressed,

“Because they were a new experience for me, and they were the best preparation for the thesis.”

Benjamin verified that he had acquired a broader, global view of higher education because of learning from diverse students throughout the world. He perceived the various political values associated with higher education and alternate viewpoints about: access, social reproduction, social transformation, and other HE issues addressed in the modules. The vast amount of reading academic articles about international issues expanded his views. He related the story of how he learnt from his peers from Middle Eastern and African countries. Benjamin said that he had no prior knowledge of HE in those parts of the world. One of his fellow doctoral participants from Saudi Arabia, for instance, “had pressure from the local authorities” that he had not experienced in the same way in France or other European countries. Another participant in his learning team was from South Africa and dealt with hiring a certain percentage of Black faculty members (government enforced affirmative action) and other external pressures that were not familiar to him.

After Kaitlyn’s first module, her perspectives on collaboration shifted. When initially she did not want to engage with fellow participants, she realized how crucial that interaction was for her personal development. As she wrote in a reflective assignment,

“I have since realised that interaction is critical to the teaching and learning process and for me to reach my potential and to blend the twin requirements of research and practice, as Fenge, L., (2010) explains, can effectively be contextualized through a personal narrative. As I take a critical view of my learning process and begin reflecting my eventual

success, I understand that I as the learner, must take responsibility for my own learning, the support is there – but I must engage in constructing new knowledge.”

4.4.3 Self-concept

Self-concept is broadly defined as how people view their abilities and characteristics, their personal identity. Rogers (1961) developed the idea of the *ideal self*, which involved looking within the self for approval; moreover, self-concept relates to self-actualization on Maslow's (1970) Hierarchy of Human Needs, when individuals aim for personal growth and realize their personal potential. An improved self-concept, in my view, often relates to increased self-awareness, self-esteem, confidence, and competence, which pertains to transformative learning stage nine, which is the “building of self-confidence in new roles and relationships” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 169). Participants' self-confidence improved as a result of demonstrating that they were capable of completing each task and module, despite difficulties (e.g., time factors, work-study-personal life balance).

Benjamin felt an extreme amount of stress at the programme's inception but then transitioned into a routine and gained confidence that he would complete the EdD. Benjamin explained that before the doctoral programme he had a high self-concept but that he gained additional reliance on his abilities after completing each module. Figuring out how to mitigate his problems, manage time, produce original ideas in a short amount of time, work in a team, and post tactful discussion posts, whilst retaining a level of authenticity, were skills that Benjamin developed as a result of his disorientation.

Vincent recalled that he felt unsure of his thoughts and discussion post writings (whole group and team) at the beginning of the doctoral programme but improved his self-concept when he read others' writings and compared them to his own writings. Vincent explained that

“I felt validated in my writing. I felt good enough. I felt more self-esteem and assurance in my self-esteem, not necessarily in my thinking but in my abilities.”

He repeated the word validated four times when he conveyed gaining self-esteem in his thinking and writing abilities. Vincent described that validation sometimes originated from his grades, when tutors validated his ideas and thoughts in his writing. Furthermore, when Vincent's fellow doctoral

peers' comments aligned with his own, when they questioned his ideas, and they told him that they had not thought of a topic in such a way, these elements led to Vincent's feelings of validation, he explained. As a result of Vincent's validation and subsequent improved self-concept, this led to him feeling capable of obtaining the doctorate after completing several modules, which he had not been certain of before beginning the online EdD programme.

Alex's disorientation eventually transformed into an improved self-concept and self-esteem.

"But as time went on, and I took cues from my peers and also had as I said before. And as I had certain aspects of my thinking and writing pointed out to me, made me feel more secure about what I could do well and what I couldn't do well. So, I found it very enriching in that respect" (Alex).

Alex mentioned that his peers and tutor gave him feedback and said he was a proficient writer; this made him feel more secure, which he depicted as an enriching experience. Throughout the interview, Alex described various personal strengths that he recognized during the doctoral programme, such as creating logical arguments, simplifying comprehensive amounts of information, and presenting information in an appealing way. Maximillian proclaimed that he provided more competent input at advisory sessions and professional meetings. As a result of the EdD programme, Maximillian improved his English skills; he expressed that doing so promoted his efficacious interactions with others at international meetings, because English is the higher education lingua franca.

Kaitlyn explicitly claimed that her self-concept changed. She said that she gained confidence and realized that her responses to discussion posts were as important and valuable as everyone else's on the programme. For instance, in the interview, she expressed that

"When they in turn said thank you very much for your comments, and you made me consider this or I hadn't considered that, then, I really started to gain a confidence."

Her ability to give critical feedback and engage in critical reading improved tremendously in her view. In her first reflective assignment, Kaitlyn wrote,

“This in turn empowered me to transform my learning from surface to profound, and importantly, not to be intimidated by others who appeared to be more knowledgeable. Relying on my study cohort and their support allowed me to depend less on the tutor and to benefit from the collaborative aspect of my learning. On reflection, I am realizing that my weakness became my strength. I now feel confident about beginning my second module.”

Although Brianna noted that she did not believe her self-concept changed, she described developing analytical skills in the learning teams. She said that how people formulated answers and approached the module assignments benefitted her thinking. Brianna implied that her self-concept improved when describing how the programme taught her the skills needed to develop a more culturally responsive curriculum and improve the student experience in her organization.

Similar to Brianna’s comments about self-concept, Bree was the only other participant who did not explicitly state that her self-concept improved. She stated that she never had trouble with self-esteem and felt comfortable with her intellectual abilities, as a result of having grown up around academics. She said that she witnessed others in the modules feeling increased self-esteem. However, Bree expressed that the doctoral programme made her change, and it allowed her to “make sense of things because it gives you the tools for thinking through, for critically thinking through.” This quote is related to the idea of improved self-esteem, as Bree gained confidence in her own ability to make sense of various experiences, when she had not been able to do so before the programme.

4.5 Social Factors

Social factors were viewed as evidence of how personal skill development and perspective change manifested themselves within a social context and were related to acting differently and exhibiting more open-mindedness. In addition, social factors pertain to any interactions among EdD participants within the programme and in their local contexts that occurred as a result of the learning in the EdD programme. Social factors’ sub-themes pertained to collaboration, communities, and practice.

4.5.1 Collaboration

The term collaboration refers to written or spoken discussions, whole group or within a learning team, as well as asynchronous and synchronous (online, face-to-face, or blended), and collaborative assignments. Concepts related to collaboration include diverse, multicultural perspectives, task completion, dialogue, relationships, support, feedback, trust, and online environment. Both advantageous and deleterious experiences were described as a result of various types of collaboration within the EdD programme.

In both the interview data and documents, collaboration among fellow doctoral participants and tutors was depicted. Kaitlyn wrote that the doctoral programme taught her to collaborate with her learning team members. Learning was a social process that merged reflection, inquiry, and action.

“During this time, I learned to be a collaborative learner, to approach learning as a social activity and that inquiry-based learning, action learning and reflection are perfect partners” (Kaitlyn).

To Kaitlyn, collaboration permitted her full potential in bridging practice and scholarship. Initially, Kaitlyn had not believed that peers could offer meaningful insights and feedback about her work but discovered throughout the EdD programme that the critical feedback from her peers was invaluable. Kaitlyn depicted the level of peer review as mandatory for her doctoral progression; examining different sources of information to form solutions, assessing different perspectives, and communicating well with others correlated to the critical thinking indicators but also to collaboration. The collaboration and critical thinking sub-themes overlapped, which suggests that cognition is not only an individualized process but is influenced through social interaction.

When I asked Maximillian about his experiences of collaborating in a learning team, he stated,

“there are pros of course because team work is a very important social skill that you can practice in a learning team. And it was very interesting to meet with people in many other countries of the world with different views, different experiences.”

Alternately, in Benjamin's reflective assignment, he wrote that discussion in the online context could be

“quite artificial because the online environment has specific writing rules and codes which greatly differ from a face-to-face classic interaction. To some extent, I see the discussion forum as an environment which is too politically correct to really allow honest discussion.”

Critically evaluating each other's writings in the learning team and throughout the modules not only improved participants' thinking but their societal influence at certain points throughout the programme. Peer and instructor feedback often led to personal development that, as a result, led to better decision making in the work place. Brianna conveyed how collegial work began to align with the critical friends' concept, as a result of the modules, and her perspective about education completely shifted. Alternately, a hardship expressed in terms of increased collaboration was when some team members either dropped out of the online EdD programme (or the tutor changed the members' learning team), and the learning team consisted of participants from only westernized backgrounds. When collaborating with all Western learning team members, this

“affected the capacity of the team to critically compare the different professional settings. However, I realised that the online environment can allow teamwork and that the specific forum for group work offered more freedom than the main discussion forum.” (Brianna)

Methods of collaboration, in addition to the learning teams, included writing partnerships with other doctoral participants on the programme. A writing partnership refers to when more than one individual agrees to plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish a piece of writing together. Doctoral participants often made commitments to read and critique one another's writing. Moreover, Bree described writing a journal article with another doctoral student, and they hope that the article will be published soon. Mendeley is an online reference sharing software that Bree used with her learning team members. On Mendeley, doctoral students are able to search for relevant, scholarly sources, save them, and then discuss the articles and their viewpoints together.

In a reflective assignment, Benjamin wrote that a module facilitated a global understanding of his institution. He analogized learning team assignments to assembling puzzle pieces, which led

to assessing weaknesses and strengths in his organization and transforming his former perspectives about solutions. Because of the diversity of the teams, Mira, for example, also conveyed that analysing the same concept as the other learning team members fostered innovative views and new applications. To her, working in the learning team was “like creation.” She described how the learning team started by deconstructing an original question, writing about it, sharing experiences and perspectives with other members, reflecting, and assimilating new viewpoints that incorporated a much broader, global view of different higher education issues.

Alex explained his view about how valuable that collaboration and multiple views were to his learning process:

“Or things that I hadn’t thought were so important were important to my peers. Kind of drew my attention to different ways of thinking and the importance of you know um, I guess considering other people’s points of views a lot more. Asking myself well why did, why don’t I think this important? Why do they think this is important, for example?”

4.5.2 Communities

The idea of community pertains to social cohesion: relationships, trust, shared interests, problems, and solutions among individuals (Bond & Lockee, 2014). Ideas related to community include individuals’ professional and educational background, personalities, values, beliefs, culture, demographics, relationships, and support. Individuals who comprise the community affect the shared stories and knowledge transfer that promote personal development, perspective change, and social impact. The learning team itself does not suggest a community; rather, evidence of communities was expressed among participants when they formed professional friendships.

Collaboration could refer solely to assignment completion and discourse that were module requirements. But community is interrelated to the social and affective dimensions, such as professional and emotional support, that result from the community. For instance, Lave and Wenger (1991) asserted that a community incorporates not only dialogue and task completion but reciprocal respect and support. People within the community comfort each other and opt to collaborate with one another to enhance knowledge (Bond & Lockee, 2014). Community was linked to social impact because the community members themselves influenced how participants

interacted with each other in the programme and with others within the professional context. In other words, participants described implementing the learning team members' feedback into written assignments and utilizing community members' pragmatic suggestions. What began as a required module assignment within a learning team sometimes became a more valuable learning experience within a community of practice. The community could be described as a social learning network, where people began to engage with each other, even when not required to for a module assignment.

"More importantly, I am gaining a network of people from different professional and cultural backgrounds" (from Alex's learning log).

Correspondingly, in an interview, Vincent illuminated the value of networking and forming supportive communities:

"Another pro was [the EdD programme] forced me to communicate with others, and that led to some networking, and I guess some online relationships with other professionals in the course. I found that not necessarily helpful to the content but helpful to my sanity. And I guess one more pro is that it kind of helped keep me on track because I was responsible to my colleagues not just the professor."

A shared experience among participants was the feeling of commitment to complete assignments, give feedback, and respond to learning team members. This feeling of commitment to team members served as a kind of peer pressure to put forth more effort and persist in the programme.

"Rather than a lonely activity, practitioner research can only be undertaken successfully with the support of a network of peers, colleagues, experts and friends, and under the supervision of a mentor" (Benjamin).

Benjamin wrote about his hardship of not having enough time and that each learning team member felt the same hardship. Thus, as a result of the excessive module requirements, doctoral

participants often emotionally supported each other within the community. Benjamin depicted his strengthened bond with another learning team member because of the shared perception that they did not have enough time for deep learning and changed actions, as a result. In this instance, the disorientation and new perspective were interlinked, as well as embedded within the community sub-theme. In the interview, Benjamin ascertained that having a fellow colleague in his organization to complete an EdD with helped him to endure academic, social, and psychological challenges. Both Benjamin and his colleague supported each other and prevented each other from dropping out of the programme. As he deciphered, he had to keep in mind his additional goal to support his colleague and continue with the programme. Although some participants developed a sense of community with fellow online EdD participants within the modules, other participants developed communities with people who were not in the same programme.

The idea that supportive relationships were valuable to enhance motivation among EdD programme participants was evident. Kaitlyn expressed that when working in a learning team that she

“really established a relationship [with learning team members]. Even though it was online, not face-to-face, I felt I made a real connection with some people. And then we did actually support each other, so I found that valuable.”

4.5.3 Practice

Within the community of practice theory, practice pertains to the collective knowledge within the community. This collective knowledge generates practical solutions that each community member would not have been able to create if working independently (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 2009). Practice is both the shared knowledge within the community and the in-practice actions of the community participants. Six of the eight participants explicitly stated that the EdD has had and continues to have a noticeable influence on their professional work. As Bree and Alex were unemployed at the time of the interview (though Alex was employed at a point during module 1), their studies could not influence their professional contexts directly, but the EdD has had and continues to have a noticeable influence on Bree’s and Alex’s personal lives. Bree’s husband was in a leadership position at a company, and she has offered him research strategies that she learned

from the modules, which were subsequently implemented. Bree also partnered with teachers at her sons' school to offer innovative pedagogical strategies. Alex collected research from modules that he said he will apply when he opens his English as a Second Language (ESL) school.

In regard to improved professional work, Brianna, depicted feeling positive about benefitting her professional context, as a result of action learning research. She explained that she began to model professional values in new ways and noticed how she interacted with colleagues improved her professional practices. In addition, Brianna's thesis focused on improving the medical curriculum to address various pedagogical, faculty, and professional practices concerns. In addition, Benjamin wrote the story of how he used his assignments in a management meeting to solidify quality indicators to improve his institution. Benjamin apprised that he could apply research literature from modules regarding quality assurance, social reproduction versus social transformation, leadership, and various adaptations to this major change of a possible merger in his context. In his reflective assignment, he wrote that learning about social capital, spaces, technology, and various contexts promoted a global view of his institution. Benjamin cited the Pedagogy-Space-Technology framework to suggest that technology may extend the educational environment to the virtual world (Radcliffe, Wilson, Powell, & Tibbets, 2008).

“The Action Research module represented an excellent opportunity to experience research in my own professional setting and to understand the specificities of this research approach compared to other research traditions. The learning by doing approach took me through the successive steps of action research and enabled me to see more clearly the challenges associated with action research.”

Throughout the modules, Benjamin and other doctoral participants learnt about the gap between faculty and administrators in their work places and how to bridge it. Benjamin related the example about how his relationships with faculty members in his organization improved. These improved relationships and enhanced support that Benjamin felt within his organization were rewarding to him. He had always held administrative positions, and he felt that some people in his organization believed that he could not have a role in academia or relations. However, as other professionals learnt that he was a doctoral candidate, their perceptions of him changed. Other scholars began to view Benjamin as an equal and took his suggestions more seriously. Benjamin's perceptions

changed about his own roles, which made communication between him and faculty more positive, as well. Benjamin spoke about how learning about values encouraged deeper reflection on social and political issues within the institution that fostered his capacity to engage with both faculty and top-level administrators.

Vincent conveyed how his learning helped him to organize his teachers into professional learning communities and teams. He gathered ideas from the learning team activities in the modules about how to facilitate powerful professional development experiences for the teachers in his organization. He ascertained that vocabulary about ideas, pedagogical philosophies, and organizational issues has changed and benefitted the way he speaks at work. Vincent told the story about how as a result of the EdD programme that he now supports his ideas with specific examples. He expressed that he often has accessed the research articles from the online library and utilized research and data to inform his staff meeting presentations. Vincent began asking his subordinates critical questions to enable their professional development and improve their actions. These changes in his behaviour have enabled fellow teachers and staff to engage in more meaningful professional development and to improve their practices.

Kaitlyn depicted initiating change in her professional environment:

“There was a definite noticeable impact at work due to my participation in the EdD programme - I created our [signature programme] here based on what we covered about learning environments in one of the modules.”

In one of Kaitlyn’s reflective assignments, she elaborated on her enhanced awareness. Her enhanced awareness enabled her to comprehend various cultural nuances in her organization that were important to improving student life quality. She aimed to enhance her knowledge of cultural, professional, and societal factors that had influenced her environment. Kaitlyn suggested that a community of practice had formed at work to resolve various organizational problems. In Kaitlyn’s view, theoretical research from the EdD programme had enabled her to contextualize theories, which deepened her understanding and improved practice.

4.6 Mapping Themes and Sub-Themes to Transformative Learning

Within this section, the themes and sub-themes will be related to the transformative learning stages. Mezirow's (1991) 10-stage transformative learning process will provide a lens to analyse participants' learning experiences. Especially in the documents from Benjamin and Kaitlyn, transformative learning stages were most evident and well-written, perhaps because the participants had extended critical and self-reflective time when writing. Five participants' responses (Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, and Brianna) seem to be closely linked to the transformative learning process, including examples of all ten stages, whereas the other three were not obvious but contained examples of some stages. For example, Maximilian's, Bree's, and Alex's interview responses did not seem to include all transformative learning stages. Instead, Maximillian's responses seem to include four transformative learning stages; Bree's include examples of two transformative learning stages, and Alex's include examples of five transformative learning stages. Table 4.2 links Mezirow's (1991) ten transformative stages to the themes and sub-themes in this study and provides some (not all) examples from the participants about the stages they experienced. An additional column that states the participants who experienced each transformative learning stage is included. Additional evidence from participants may be found in Appendix E.

Table 4. 2

Linking transformative learning stages to themes

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning stages	Linking to themes and sub-themes to transformative learning stages	Example of verbatim evidence from participants	Participants who experienced each stage of transformative learning
1. A disorienting dilemma	Time management and perspective change	<i>It should not be forgotten that some learners are not native English speakers, and that some have demanding full-time</i>	Benjamin, Mira, Maximillian, Kaitlyn,

		<p><i>managerial positions which simply do not allow to spend 25 hours per week studying. For this reason, my orientation completely changed during this module to a combination of surface learning and strategic orientation (Benjamin).</i></p> <p><i>And between time zones, between the busy work life and home life, and you know personal things and responsibilities I felt that did cause me discomfort. I guess the biggest discomfort or most discomfort I felt was that I didn't feel that I could do my best work (Vincent).</i></p> <p><i>Suddenly, I start feeling left on my own. I think there's a transition that's missing from the taught part of the program to the thesis stage (Brianna).</i></p> <p><i>I'm a non-native speaker of English, while there were many native speakers in the learning team, so I felt sometimes uncomfortable with not being able to reach the same linguistic level of discussion (Maximillian).</i></p> <p><i>So about the time that I started the EdD programme, I was</i></p>	<p>Vincent, Brianna, Bree, Alex</p>
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		<p><i>already in the process of change. My father committed suicide, my brother drowned, my mother had a stroke. So this was all in a year. Yeah, so we moved here. So we left where we'd been living forever. My children were teenagers. And we went to another country. All that happened, and then, I started the EdD programme. So yes, I have changed. How much of that is due to the EdD programme I don't know (Bree).</i></p>	
<p>2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame</p>	<p>Critical reflection, disorientation, and self-concept</p>	<p><i>This was disturbing on reflection, as I allowed the inaction of others to affect my motivation. However, it bothered me to have to constantly apologise for not having the time to perform correctly the required task, and I felt this was unfair because the main reason for that was the excessive amount of work required (Benjamin).</i></p> <p><i>I just started writing then started cherry picking quotes to incorporate into my writing, the better my results. Oddly enough. So that was a little bit unsettling because I generally like to do all</i></p>	<p>Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna, Alex</p>

		<p><i>the reading beforehand. Start writing then check if I actually understood what I had read and interpreting it correctly. Uh, it turned out that flying by the seat of my pants actually was more successful than deep consideration in some respects. I felt uncomfortable with that</i> (Alex).</p>	
<p>3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions</p>	<p>Critical reflection and critical thinking skills</p>	<p><i>I have learned what it means to be part of an online community of practice all with a common aim. I know I can also rely on my critical friend _____, who has been very supportive so far, to provide some feedback, and I will be happy to offer her the same assistance in her own research</i> (Benjamin).</p> <p><i>Sometimes it may or may not be the knowledge facts, but your way of thinking has changed...</i> (Mira).</p> <p><i>The foundation for this learning was developing an ability to critically analyse all aspects of my learning, including myself as a learner</i> (Kaitlyn).</p> <p><i>I guess just certainly a maturity in the way my view of education, working with colleagues</i></p>	<p>Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna, Alex</p>

		<p><i>understanding the commercial basis of a university (Brianna).</i></p> <p><i>I tend to be an extroverted thinker, so it takes me a little bit of time to write things down, organize my thoughts, and present my ideas. And then, I can also react to my own ideas and then going through the process of getting feedback and giving feedback kind of developing particular aspects of the thought process was really interesting....</i></p> <p><i>I guess considering other people's points of views a lot more. Asking myself well why did why don't I think this important why do they think this is important for example... My strength appears to be that I am able to take a large amount of material and crunch it down to something that's manageable and present it in a way that's very simple (Alex).</i></p>	
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and	Self-concept, collaboration and communities	<p><i>I have learned what it means to be part of an online community of practice all with a common aim. I know I can also rely on my critical friend _____, who has been very supportive so far, to</i></p>	Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna, Alex

that others have negotiated a similar change		<p><i>provide some feedback, and I will be happy to offer her the same assistance in her own research (Benjamin).</i></p> <p><i>I think everyone goes through that process of insecurity. I felt insecure. You're impressed by the way your peers think, and the way they present their ideas.... (Alex)</i></p>	
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions	Reintegration of new perspective and practice	<p><i>As the final thesis approaches, I realise that my own professional network is taking shape but this assignment enabled me to identify gaps where additional support is needed (Benjamin).</i></p> <p><i>In fact, the feedback from my tutor contained the phrase "aha moment" (Kaitlyn).</i></p> <p><i>I think with how you work with your team probably changed. How you work with colleagues. You can use colleagues as critical friends. A partnership in what we're trying to do here. I guess it makes me want to model perhaps educational values in a different way now (Brianna).</i></p> <p><i>When we talk through things, there's certain things I can say to the teachers now that I know</i></p>	Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna, Bree

		<p><i>they're able to apply to use to help them. And they do.... And also, I use it with my husband, who when we moved over here, he came over to take over as Managing Director, a company that had had some bad management before. So we've been able to work together with the tools that I've used to turn things around. So they work, I can tell you they work just as well for business as they do for school (Bree).</i></p>	
6. Planning of a course of action	Critical reflection, collaboration, communities	<p><i>Besides, it gave me a sense of what I could personally do in order to influence the shape and future of my organisation, through the final session on internal and external leadership. I am confident that my aim of providing a template for the way forward will be possible (Benjamin).</i></p>	Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans	Critical reflection, critical thinking skills, time management, perspective change, self-	<p><i>The comparison between the different organisational cultures within the learning team was an interesting exercise, which helped everyone understand better the organisational context of the other and paved the way for</i></p>	Benjamin, Mira, Maximillian, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna

	concept, practice	<i>deeper relationships within the team (Benjamin).</i>	
8. Provisional trying of new roles	Reintegration of new perspective, self-concept, practice, communities	<i>Finding my place within the complexly connected community of practice now surfacing around identifying an organisational problem and offering possible solutions will put my research in the centre of possible future research in this context, resulting from this identification of the ways in which change, driven by government policy, can manifest in changes to teaching and learning, policy and practice (Kaitlyn).</i>	Benjamin, Mira, Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships	Self-concept, reintegration of new perspective, practice	<i>At a personal level, with this module, I began to consider myself as a research practitioner rather than a doctoral student, and I started reflecting on practical issues directly related to my research interest, my work context and the possible approach to carry out the research (Kaitlyn). I felt validated in my writing. I felt good enough. I felt more self-esteem and assurance in my self-esteem (Vincent).</i>	Benjamin, Mira, Maximillian Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna, Alex

		<p><i>Yeah just seeing how different people would formulate answers. Their ideas of approaching tasks. The content they would include. That was very useful. That added value to the way you were thinking about things (Brianna). And as I had certain aspects of my thinking and writing pointed out to me, made me feel more secure about what I could do well and what I couldn't do well (Alex).</i></p>	
<p>10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.</p>	<p>Reintegration of new perspective and practice</p>	<p><i>I realise that the learning process in relation to the EdD is not limited to the academic arena but constitutes a truly holistic experience affecting every aspect of my personal context (Benjamin).</i></p> <p><i>And I think I get what I want from this programme. Yes, it's changed my teaching. It's not the approach. It's not the methods. But in my teaching, I stress more about the critical thinking (Mira). I feel that I have changed as a person and as a professional, I have gained valuable insights into learning, and I have become more goal-oriented (Kaitlyn).</i></p>	<p>Benjamin, Mira, Maximillian Kaitlyn, Vincent, Brianna</p>

		<p><i>After I keep the reflective thinking, also, became part and parcel of my professional life, which was more or less missing beforehand (Maximillian).</i></p> <p><i>Everything from vocabulary, to ideas about certain things, certain structures and philosophies of learning and organizations. Those things have impacted the way that I speak at work. They impact the kinds of questions that I ask others. And really that reflective practitioner piece that whole piece around thinking about what we're doing and why we're doing it and what's the philosophy behind it, and how can we grow and make it better? Those ideals I guess within the program have really helped me at work because I'm thinking differently at my work place (Vincent).</i></p> <p><i>I do think it makes you look at things differently as I think it develops a level of critical awareness to the external world, which certainly is very valuable to me (Brianna).</i></p>	
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Bree's responses include evidence from only two transformative learning stages. The disorienting dilemma stage quite possibly occurred before Bree began the online EdD programme, as a result of loss and trauma (relatives passing) and continued throughout as she gained "tools" for making sense of tragedy. Unlike the other participants, Bree believed that much reflection during the programme was not meaningful, and this could be because it was not contextualized in her professional context. Bree was the one participant who was not employed at any time during the online EdD programme. One possible interpretation is that applying learning from the online EdD programme has a vital role in critical reflection, self-reflection, dialogue, and the transformative learning process. Without a professional context to draw insights from, learning from the online EdD programme seems to be less relevant. Bree also mentioned that she wanted for the reflection to integrate an arts-based approach (such as writing poems, stories, or songs about the reflections) and a dialogic approach with tutors and fellow students in the programme. Further interpretations will be made in Chapter V.

4.7 Summary of Findings

Presented in this Chapter IV were the data analysis findings from the eight participant interviews and reflective documents. Although four participants shared various documents, only two (Benjamin and Kaitlyn) offered several reflective assignments, which had the richest, in-depth data about their learning outcomes. The data suggests that five participants experienced the ten transformative learning stages, but three of the participants (Maximillian, Bree, and Alex) experienced only some stages. Though Maximillian, Bree, and Alex only experienced some stages, there is evidence that they may have experienced what could be considered transformative learning, as the stages are more of a guide and not a rigid process. "Transformative learning appears to be a linear, but not necessarily step-wise, process" (Cranton, 2016, p.42). The overlapping among themes and sub-themes implies the complex, holistic nature of adult learning. Presented in Chapter V will be a discussion and impact of these findings in relation to the research reviewed in Chapter II.

Chapter V Discussion and Impact

Incorporated in this chapter is a discussion of the study's findings, in relation to relevant literature reviewed in Chapter II. Interview transcripts, reflective documents from participants, and policy documents from the university were the study's primary methods. Chapter IV presented findings that suggest that transformative learning occurred among five participants and could be linked to main themes of personal skill development, perspective change, and social factors, and sub-themes (in section 4.6). Included further in this chapter is a discussion of theoretical and professional practice contributions to knowledge. The following sections (5.1-5.3) systematically provide responses to the three research questions (presented in Chapter III) and restated here.

1. Do the online participants experience some forms of transformative learning during their EdD programme?
2. What are the factors that promote or hinder transformative learning?
3. What are the impacts of online EdD learning (or transformative learning if it occurs) on individuals' personal development and professional practices?

5.1 Transformative Learning during the EdD Programme

The transformative learning process involves more than knowledge acquisition but questioning assumptions, where "the outcome is a deep shift in perspective" (Cranton, 2016, p. 42). On the other hand, the learning process results in capacity change and skill improvement (Illeris, 2007) but does not necessarily lead to transformative learning. Despite analysing the participants' stories through the lens of Mezirow's (1991) 10-stage transformative learning theory, relevant to clarify, nonetheless, is that transformative learning is not meant to be viewed as a rigid, chronological learning process but rather as a conceptual guide to depict the highest form of learning (Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning is typically linear but does not always follow a stage by stage, or step-by-step, process (Cranton, 2016; Taylor, 2000). Moreover, transformative learning is not finite, as Newman (2012) argues that this was Mezirow's intention. Evidence that transformative learning occurred does not require that every stage be readily apparent in a chronological order in the participants' stories. But usually, the disorienting dilemma begins the transformative learning process and a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective concludes it (Mezirow, 1991).

But the perspective change could be re-evaluated and alter again in the future should a new dilemma result from it.

To clarify transformative learning in terms of knowledge, knowledge may be viewed in three ways: technical, practical, and emancipatory; Mezirow's (1991) "expression of the goal of adult education as transformative learning reveals how it is drawn from Habermas's (1971) idea of emancipatory knowledge..." (Cranton, 2016, p. 11). Emancipatory knowledge relates to questioning technical and practical (also called instrumental and communicative) knowledge (Cranton, 2016). Self-reflection and critical reflection of the sociocultural context and how to take action to cause positive social change is what is meant by emancipatory knowledge (Freire, 1970). Similarly, critical reflection and dialectic discourse are two learning tasks that are central to becoming more open-minded and detached from preconceived assumptions, or more specifically – meaning perspectives (i.e., habits of mind and points of view), thereby enabling changed actions (Mezirow, 1991). Social change (that could be conceptualized as resulting from emancipatory knowledge and the transformative learning process) is an expected outcome of practice knowledge gained during EdD study (Costley, 2014). Evident are the interrelationships among emancipatory knowledge, transformative learning, and expected EdD learning outcomes.

Evidence that all transformative learning stages occurred among five of the eight participants may be found in this study's data and is shown in section 4.6. All results from the data do not easily fit into the transformative learning theory, and as Newman (2012) expressed, much of what some authors would call transformative learning should actually be called good learning. Whilst good learning is a relevant way to view some of the learning during the online EdD programme, the transformative learning theory was a valuable way to conceptualise some of the learning the majority of the participants in this study described. Table 4.2 demonstrates how the research themes and sub-themes are interconnected to the transformative learning stages and provides examples from the participants' stories. The main challenges that the participants experienced, discussed in the time management and perspective change sections 4.3.3 and 4.4, could be viewed as related to the cumulative and developmental disorienting dilemma stage one process. The words cumulative and developmental are emphasised here, in response to Newman's (2012) criticism that much of the transformative learning literature wrongly depicts a "single dramatic disorienting dilemma" (p. 43). Critical reflection that involved both self and social critique was a sub-theme that pertained to Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning stage

two: self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame, as well as stage three, a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions.

Stage four of recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change could imply the importance of community formation and support systems of varying kinds discussed in Chapter II (Brown & Wilson, 2016; Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004). Participants often used the term community of practice to express the type of social support that they hoped to attain to improve learning outcomes. Understanding that the transformative learning process is shared, or at least that the incremental and developmental disorienting dilemmas and challenges among doctoral students are shared, could generate a better sense of belonging, connectedness, and support, given that students and tutors are taught how to effectively support each other and have the time to do so. Sharing personal stories, including feelings about learning challenges and personal experiences, could be considered informal, extrarational (and not academic) interactions that some academics may oppose and students feel uncomfortable with, however. But researchers have suggested that social presence and relational connections be improved in VLE's to form authentic communities among doctoral students (Crosta, Manokore, & Gray, 2016, Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004). Challenging one another's thoughts is not the only way to build social presence, and informal interactions, such as storytelling could potentially lead to improved connections and belonging (i.e. "bring people together..." (p. 19)), and perhaps promote transformative learning (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). As discussed in section 2.4, open communication, creativity, and emphasis on students' prior experiences (which all could be interrelated to storytelling) are some of the learning tasks that may improve a connection between theory and practice (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). One consideration when sharing feelings and personal stories about online EdD learning is privacy, which is why this type of engagement could occur among small groups or between student and tutor, even though time may be a hindrance.

The exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions related to how the participants viewed themselves in their professional work and where gaps in professional knowledge and actions were revealed to them through reflection. Though some participants described a tremendous amount of self-doubt in their competencies and ability to do well in the online EdD programme, seven participants described an improved self-concept when achieving

success: passing the module, receiving encouraging comments from peers and tutors, and becoming more competent at one's job. Six of the participants' stories also convey evidence that they reintegrated new perspectives into their professional practice that were a direct result of the online EdD programme learning.

As variant conceptions of transformative learning forms exist, another way to analyse the participants' stories is through examining transformative learning types (Tisdell, 2012). The participants' stories suggest that three types of transformative learning were evident (Types 1-3: cognitive rational, extrarational, and social change) (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). Type 1 refers to experiences that change individuals' epistemological approaches and how to construct meaning in different forms (Kegan, 2000, 2009). Changing approaches to learning could pertain to the student realizing the importance of examining diverse perspectives, as opposed to learning independently (discussed in sections 4.4.2 and 4.6), which is an example of Type 1 transformative learning. Six of the eight participants discussed a critical assessment of epistemic assumptions, as shown in Table 4.2.

Type 2 transformative learning is extrarational in nature and could refer to a change in people's moods, feelings, and insights that provoke existential questioning. Keefer (2015) conceptualizes the transformative learning process as crossing a threshold that involves "uncertainty, confusion, or doubt" (p. 18). When engaged in doctoral study, emotional responses, such as shame and anger, may result (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2015; Lee, 2009). Some participants felt extreme anxiety and discomfort knowing that peers and doctoral tutors would have copies of their public form of discussion responses, for example. The public form of discussion (i.e., Blackboard) functioned as a display of individuals' writing and critical thinking abilities, which sometimes caused excessive fear about their ability to write at the doctoral level (discussed in section 4.4.1). As Ng (2001) pointed out, researchers have indicated that communications within a VLE may increase stressful feelings among students. Participants feared not meeting their peers and tutors' expectations, which intensified emotional feelings. Some participants felt that the public form of discussion hindered authentic discourse because of pressure to be "politically correct." One participant mentioned that the whole class discussion forum was too politically correct to engage in real dialogue (discussed in section 4.5.1). This is an important issue because a safe climate and authenticity should underpin the development of critically reflective skills or any adult learning context (Daloz, 2000). Engaging in politically correct speech could cause

students to neglect relevant topics altogether, particularly if they feel judged. And though some participants discussed wanting to meet more in an online yet face-to-face, synchronous medium (e.g., through Skype), they could not because of time issues (explored further in section 4.3.3). Moreover, participants lived in different time zones, which made frequent face-to-face interactions and synchronous online discussion challenging if not impossible for some.

In an online context, ambiguity within discussions could be compared to a Rorschach screen, where learners project their experiential problems and emotions (Turkle, 1995). Online collaboration promoted the type of emotionality necessary for elucidating unconscious issues, which sometimes caused some miscommunication, emotional, and social conflicts. Dirkx and Smith (2009) described the example, from their own course, of a student wanting to kick her computer screen, when participating in a team research project. Several participants in this study described frustrations when working in the learning team, when some members did not put forth as much effort as themselves, and methodological conflicts about learning tasks resulted. Some participants experienced ridicule for not producing high-level responses or contributing enough to the learning team tasks. Other stories emphasized how the learning teams formed a group where knowledge was co-constructed. Some emotions associated with effective communication among team members were positive, which increased self-concept and perceptions of their ability to contribute effectively. The liminality, or resistance and pressure to change, forces individuals to experience a transition that shifts their learning in a changed, existential world (Mälkki & Greene, 2014). The majority of the participants' stories implicate the idea that Type 2 transformative learning, or an extrarational approach involving the emotions, was central to the online EdD experience.

Type 3 transformative learning promotes social change that is related to improving professional practices, explored further in section 4.5.3 and Appendix F. Burgess and Wellington (2010) described how the EdD students in their study recognized their skills and power to promote social change. The participants' stories also emphasize the realisation in their own abilities and skill development that led to social change. Overall, the participants' stories emphasize the importance of connecting theory and practice, which is expected to lead to social change, and will be discussed further in section 5.3.

This section has offered further insights – from the participants' stories – about the second key issue in section 1.3: emotional and social challenges that are associated with transformative

learning outcomes. Emotional and social challenges included extreme anxiety or feeling out of one's comfort zone, and relational challenges (e.g., difficulties meeting the doctoral expectations as tutors perceived them). More research is needed to determine how effective support systems may be formed in a VLE to address the many emotional and social challenges that online EdD students experience as a result of any type of learning, which also is stated in section 6.3.

5.2 Factors that Promote or Hinder Transformative Learning

Included in this section is a detailed discussion of the learning tasks that may foster transformative learning. The disorienting dilemma is the first stage in promoting transformative learning and may result from various learning tasks (e.g., critical reflection, dialectic discourse, dialogic reflections, storytelling, and applying new knowledge to practice). This study reinforces Mezirow's (1991) idea that critical reflection and dialectic discourse (discussed in Chapter II) are main learning tasks that compel the disorienting dilemma. In addition to dialectic discourse, Mezirow (2012) discussed reflective discourse as "searching for a common understanding and assessment of the justification of an interpretation or belief" (p. 78). The reflective discourse in Mezirow's (2012) writings relates to forming the best judgements and thinking critically about an argument. The best judgement requires evidence and diverse perspectives to challenge it. In contrast, I define dialogic reflections as when students openly communicate with each other about their prior experiences, feelings, and challenges as a result of the online doctoral programme. The dialogic reflections are not about forming best judgements or engaging in a cognitive rational approach only but engaging in the more intuitive, emotional, or extrarational aspects of learning to build a sense of support. This support, or common ground, could lead students to transformative learning stage four, or the recognition that discontent and transformation are shared. A more supportive VLE could result from dialogic reflections, whereby students may understand that their many challenges on the online EdD programme are common.

Most participants expressed that the dialogic reflections between them and doctoral tutors during the DDP modules fostered deeper self and critical reflections about their experiences than when they reflected independently. The student-tutor discussions relate to improved social presence, discussed in the communities of inquiry framework (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The delayed response time in an asynchronous forum inhibits interactive dialogue and could be why the majority of the participants preferred to engage in face-to-face online dialogues with their tutors

instead of only writing their reflections. Several participants complained about not having enough student-tutor dialogues not only because of the online EdD programme structure but because of time constraints, in terms of being full-time employees.

Made evident in Chapter II is that critical reflection should be distinguished from reflection. Critical reflection integrates reflection on power structures and how those in power oppress, control, influence, and manipulate those they subjugate. If reflection is to be considered critical, it should include identifying, examining, and questioning how hierarchical structures influence professional practice (Brookfield, 2009). Engaging in critical reflection is emotionally and socially challenging because it causes students to understand their powerlessness and former biases, and it is not always welcomed in a professional context (Brookfield, 2000; Mälkki & Greene, 2014). In this study, when participants engaged in critical reflection, they oftentimes provided stories about past educational experiences. In these former experiences, the teacher held the power to transmit information, typically in lecture form. One participant reported that in her context that the teacher was sometimes thought of as “superman or super lady” to students, who were not permitted to question their teachers and therefore unable to challenge the ideas that the teacher and society promoted. This participant noted that after reflecting critically that she now encourages her students to question her statements and writings in textbooks, thereby questioning hierarchical structures, which represents an epistemological shift. This epistemological shift is indicated because the participant now believes that questioning reproduced knowledge and prior assumptions are integral approaches to effective teaching and learning.

Within the public form of discussion (Blackboard), participants could pose reflective inquiries and acknowledge their peers’ disorienting dilemmas (discussed in section 4.5.2), but the public form of discussion sometimes hindered authenticity. The public form of discussion, though sometimes integrated self-reflection, was more rational and academically inclined. Green (2012) referred to therapeutic alliances as an important structure to handle liminal experiences and disorienting dilemmas, which reinforces the idea of a strong support system. Recognizing that liminality and edge emotions are an inherent part of the transformative learning process, which often takes years to negotiate, the ‘accompanists’ listen to the individuals’ difficulties without suggesting quick fix solutions (Mälkki & Green, 2014). Whilst the doctoral tutors and students may accept the inevitability of discontentment and anxiety that will lead to transformed perspectives, they “relax in the presence of chaos, placing their trust in the process of existential

inquiry” (Mälkki & Green, 2014, p. 18). The majority of participants expressed feeling out of their comfort zones throughout the online EdD programme (and all conveyed various disorienting dilemma types that they experienced), so it is important for the online EdD students to discuss the overwhelming emotional and social challenges with those who truly care and support each other. These discussions may not necessarily occur most effectively in a whole class (or whole cohort) public form of discussion but rather in pairs or small, flexible groups of three to five.

The TNHE VLE enabled diverse students (from different countries, socioeconomic statuses, cultures, and professional roles) to collaborate and engage in dialectic discourse and express stories about their prior learning experiences and professional contexts. If not for the TNHE context via the internet, the participants most likely would not be able to participate in the programme or interact with participants throughout the world on a regular basis. Many lived on different continents and had full-time jobs, thereby making relocating to a different country unlikely for most well-established professionals. Sharing stories of prior learning experiences or professional contexts integrated diverse cultural threads, and whilst “listening” to (or reading) the stories, individuals could further reflect on their own. Researchers have suggested that storytelling may foster transformative learning (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). “The story is an element of the teller’s self, and it also has its own aliveness, beyond the self” (p. 459), and storytelling is where “the normal rules of discourse relax” (Tyler & Schwartz, 2012, p. 459). This relaxing of discourse possibly allows for a more informal, self-reflective exchange when students express the whole learning experience, not only the cognitive aspects. Storytelling may be viewed as “liberating” (p. 120) without “a priori expectations often associated with graduate-level assignments” (Hoggan & Militello, 2015, p. 120). Hoggan and Militello (2015) emphasized the value of storytelling among doctoral students because it improves reflection and builds a community, which is desperately needed, particularly in online doctoral programmes. Engaging in the innovative practices, such as storytelling, nonetheless, may cause “a perfect storm of institutional freedom, programmatic support, and individual entrepreneurship” (Hoggan & Militello, 2015, p. 125). Although Newman (2012) argues that storytelling proves nothing, more recent research has suggested that storytelling is a valuable practice that allows students to form relationships and teachers to understand how their students experience learning.

Applying knowledge to practice is both a learning task and process that may support critical reflection, dialectic discourse, dialogic reflections, and storytelling. In the online EdD, applying

new knowledge to practice, which also could be viewed as engaging in action research, is a clear expectation of all students. Then, the professional context becomes the medium by which to engage in the learning tasks that promote transformative learning. Acting on changed meaning perspectives is an inseparable part of transformative learning (Cranton, 2016; Mezirow, 1991). The transformative learning process results in a deep shift in perspective, and “That change serves as action, and that internal action will find expression in external actions” (Cranton, 2016, p. 131). Further discussion of applying knowledge to practice, or taking action on the changed perspectives that result from transformative learning, will be included in section 5.3, which relates to improved personal development and professional practices.

If the factors that promote transformative learning do not occur, this will hinder the possibility for transformative learning. Specifically, some factors that could hinder transformative learning include limited critical reflection, weak support networks, public forms of discussion (i.e., the whole class Blackboard discussion) that exacerbate students’ feelings of being judged harshly, and an array of emotional, psychological and relational problems that could result from online EdD study. Critical reflection and dialectic discourse are central to transformative learning, so clearly, if these do not occur, transformative learning may not either. In terms of weak support, “It is through the support of others that we have the courage to challenge our own perspectives, assumptions, and beliefs” (Cranton, 2016, p. 122). The supportive individuals could be viewed as “guiding lights” (p. 5), comprised of “(university staff, workplace colleagues, fellow students, families, and friends), professional and academic figures that provide inspiration and stimulating thought, and resources needed in moments of crisis” (Flutter, 2016, p. 5) Thus, without support, or guiding lights, and without a safe environment in which to share honest issues and concerns, questioning prior assumptions may not effectively be expressed. Whilst being open-minded and non-judgemental are significant when forming supportive communities, a factor that could counteract meaningful self and social critique is when students validate, reinforce, and duplicate faulty assumptions and hegemonic biases. “A group’s pooling of individual experiences can be a myopic exchange of prejudices” (p. 12), and groupthink is more common if group members are drawn from the “same class, cultural group, and geographical area” (Brookfield, 2015b, p.13). Although students may believe that they are challenging their prior assumptions, sometimes they are not unless engaging in discourse with guiding lights who express diverse viewpoints. The tutor should actively intervene, engage, and present alternate points of view on which to reflect.

Some problems resulted from the TNHE VLE that could counteract critical reflection, dialectic discourse (and ultimately, transformative learning), such as the cultural, linguistic, and instructional design disconnections that Wang (2007) discussed. For example, three of the participants were English as a Second Language Learners, and all three described how different approaches to critical reflection and language presented cultural and linguistic disconnections. Those three participants' stories express how they felt that they had more difficulty engaging in critical reflection, not because of cognitive disparity but because of cultural norms (i.e. opening up and sharing feelings with a tutor and fellow students was a new experience). Because of the linguistic disconnection, the learning tasks of reading many academic texts and writing as such were more time consuming for those three participants than for fellow students, they explained. In a transnational, online context, the cultural and linguistic disconnections should be given attention if all students are to feel a sense of connectedness, belonging, and support. One suggestion is that the instructional design should include some flexibility and cultural and linguistic responsiveness. Cultural responsiveness examples include drawing from diverse epistemologies and cultural perspectives, in order to facilitate transformative learning (Tisdell & Tolliver, 2009). Linguistic responsiveness pertains to having numerous support systems for English as Second Language Learners.

Research literature about how a number of different cultures, especially eastern cultures, perceive critical reflection is limited. "Critical reflection advocated by some western scholars is missing in the major thread of discussions in China" (Zeichner & Yan Liu, 2010, p. 79). One study indicated that reflection was viewed differently than in western cultures. Zeichner and Yan Liu (2010) attributed this phenomenon to Confucianism, a philosophy that reveres individual reflection and criticism, instead of societal reflections and criticism; critical theory often is not viewed as an underpinning influence of critical reflection in China. Instead, critical reflection is viewed as finding a problem, solutions to it, and reflection on outcomes (Zeichner & Yan Liu, 2010). This point does not imply that 'eastern' cultures should assimilate Eurocentric critical reflection principles but rather that teachers and students should be aware of students' diverse epistemologies and approaches to critical reflection. The study data corroborate the idea that intercultural students approach critical reflection differently and a responsiveness among tutors and fellow students may improve learning experiences.

Learning tasks that foster self-reflection, social critique, and dialectic discourse may cause the disorienting dilemma, thereby initiating the transformative learning process (Cranton, 2016). The study data suggest that more informal methods of self-reflection, social critique, and dialectic discourse may be in the forms of dialogic reflections and storytelling in various forms. Moreover, dialectic discourse may integrate prior experiences and stories about knowledge applications that deepen and challenge existing knowledge. The next section will discuss how participants acted on their new meaning perspectives, as well as how transformative learning may lead to personal development and professional practice impacts.

5.3 Impact of Transformative Learning on Personal Development and Professional Practices

Improving professional practice is the crux of any professional doctorate programme. Personal development and improved professional practices are entwined as are the personal and professional selves (Knowles, 2016). Wellington (2013) described three impacts that professional doctorates have on students, including professional career, personal life, and discourse improvements, also implicating the entwinement of personal development and professional practices. When one develops personally, evidence of this typically manifests itself in professional practices, but impacts of each will be distinguished in this discussion for a deeper analysis.

Even though all participants did not experience all transformative learning stages, but what could be called “good learning” (Newman, 2014, p. 6), important to emphasize is that transformative learning is an appropriate theory to examine doctoral students’ learning processes for several reasons. The reader may disagree with my view that transformative learning theory has contributed useful insights into the EdD phenomenon, but there are reasons to justify my claim. For one, the transformative learning process begins with a disorienting dilemma, which could be conceptualised as the type of tremendous intellectual, emotional, psychological and social challenges that doctoral students experience. Hawley (2010) described the doctoral process as a complex metamorphosis “from student to scholar” (p. 29) that each student experiences in a way as unique as a fingerprint. Similar to the transformative learning stages two and three that require self-examination and a critical assessment of assumptions, the EdD programme design deliberately incorporates self and critical reflection into reflective assignments, learning logs, hand-in assignments, and discussions. Trying new roles and forming new relationships, as well as creating plans of action are expected among doctoral students. During and at the end of the student to

scholar metamorphosis, reasonable to suppose is that the reintegration of new (more objective and discerning) perspectives has advanced the student's personal development and professional practices. The new perspectives could pertain to Mezirow's (2000) six habits of mind: (1) epistemic: how individuals acquire knowledge; (2) sociolinguistic: social norms, cultural expectations, how to use knowledge; (3) psychological: how individuals feel about themselves, self-concept, and fears; (4) moral-ethical: conscience and morality; (5) philosophical: values, beliefs, and guides; (6) aesthetic: "values, attitudes, tastes, judgements, and standards about beauty" (Cranton, 2016, p. 21). The professional doctorate student's new perspectives could relate to one, several, or all of the habits of mind that Mezirow (2000) distinguished. The internal changes among the doctoral students typically affect the students' external world.

Evident within the stories of the participants in this study, additional specific impacts were delineated: impacts on competence, personal and professional relationships, openness to criticism, and welcoming new and diverse perspectives. To emphasize, the improved skill of critical reflection is integral to the transformative learning process but reflection of any kind does not suggest that transformative learning has occurred. This section will be organized by discussing each impact in more depth. And though there are relationships among each of the impacts, discussing them separately will enable an analysis that could then be pieced together to form a more comprehensive view of the online EdD phenomenon.

Competence is defined as "the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilization of psychosocial prerequisites" (Rychen & Salganik, 2003, p. 43). Impacts on competence could benefit professional career, personal life, and discourse, and some researchers have directly related the notion of competence to the ability to apply knowledge to effectively overcome new challenges (Illeris, 2014). "Competences are about what people are able to do in practice..." (Illeris, 2014, p. 115). Related to the transformative learning stage nine (building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships), the data from this study suggest that six of the eight participants experienced stage nine in terms of feeling insecure, fearful, anxious and then validated, "good enough," and accomplished, for examples, in the role of doctoral student. Both positive and negative personal perceptions of self-competence resulted at different points of the online EdD programme, which relates to a psychological habit of mind shift (Mezirow, 2000).

Competences could also be described as developing certain skills. Discussed in Chapter IV were the participants' improved skills of critical reflection, critical thinking, and time management. For instance, Brianna described how critical reflection and reflexivity resulted in the realisation that the delivered curriculum in her professional context was an ethnocentric export of a more dominant, Anglophone, or "western" culture, that did not adapt to students' unique sociocultural backgrounds. Without adapting the instructional design to the students' learning needs, Brianna focused on medical studies about alcoholism. The participant explained that alcoholism is a prevalent problem in the UK but rare in Bahrain. As a result of critical reflection and reflexive thinking, a new "signature programme" that was more responsive to students' sociocultural context was designed. Critical thinking relates to solving problems and examining diverse perspectives that will be discussed in terms of welcoming new and diverse viewpoints. Even though time management may seem irrelevant to well-established professionals, this study confirmed the significance of time in how one perceives agency, interactions with colleagues, and efficiency. Battling the challenge of fulfilling multiple roles necessitated managing time better and was a main skill, or competency, that seven participants described.

Personal and professional relationships changed as a result of the online EdD programme. The majority of the participants described both positive and negative impacts on personal and professional relationships. An example of a negative impact is that Benjamin quit his job because of major value conflicts with his boss that related to learning in the online EdD programme. But on the other hand, Benjamin said that engaging with EdD students in different professional roles, as professors, improved his understanding of how to build better relationships with the professors who he managed. Perhaps most significant to the participants was the support derived from personal and professional relationships. "Community might seem a rather grandiose word" (p. 67), but a community, instead of a network, implies "emotional warmth and psychological security" (Brookfield, 2015b, p. 67). Discussed in section 5.2 and again here, the participants in this study emphasized the relevance of having emotional and social support that could be formed among their tutors, peers, colleagues, family, and friends and conceptualized as communities. Similarly, one professional doctorate student in another study described drawing strength from family and others whilst struggling with "loneliness and poverty" (p. 99), which led to personal and professional development (Knowles, 2016). Researchers have shown that emotional and social support among part-time doctoral students could be advanced through the student cohort model (that forms a type

of community) because the students feel that they are “travelling alone to individual destinations, but together on the route” (Piercy & Gordon, 2015, p. 397). In the participants’ descriptions of support and communities, the concept of landscapes of practice emerged (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Although the participants did not say “landscapes of practice,” their discussion focused on widely spread communities, as opposed to compartmentalized or more localized, homogenous communities.

Landscapes of practice are widely dispersed across local, national, and global boundaries and interconnect the experiences of the individual who participates in them. “The notion of a single community of practice misses the complexity of most ‘bodies of knowledge’” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 15). A landscape of practice is comprised of three main components: engagement, imagination, and alignment. As Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) explained, engagement relates to action, enacting practice, reflecting, and debating: “There is no substitute for direct engagement in practice as a vehicle for learning the competence of a community” (p. 20). Imagination relates to self-reflection and belongingness. Envisioning oneself amid the landscape of a group of professors researching at a university, doctoral students debating at a brick and mortar school or online, or administrators constructing policies, for examples, then self-reflecting on practices is meant to improve connectedness. Alignment relates to the context where the engagement in practice occurs, and “is a two-way process of coordinating enterprises, perspectives, interpretations, and contexts so that action has the effects we expect” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 21). This idea of alignment relates to critical reflection in that the practitioner analyses the power dynamics and applicable factors involved in a given sociocultural context and develops the most effective practices to yield the imagined outcome. Possible outcomes, particularly for the EdD student, perhaps mean to enact social change and improvements to professional practices.

In any metamorphosis, or transition, (from student to scholar, practitioner to student, practitioner to scholar) feelings of inadequacy and emotional responses are common. Feeling a sense of failure, the inability to post what may be deemed a doctoral-level response, generated emotional and social challenges among the majority of participants, which is the second key issue mentioned in section 1.3. Attention should be drawn to the landscapes of practice construct, where students make a concerted effort to develop supportive communities in the EdD programme and elsewhere to expand the body of knowledge and practice. These supportive communities are ones

where students engage regularly, imagine their place within the communities and feel connected to them, as well as draw knowledge from those communities to advance skills (competencies) and professional practices. The landscapes of practice have the potential to serve intellectual, emotional, and social purposes for doctoral students. Further information about landscapes of practice will be discussed in section 5.4.

An openness to criticism and welcoming new and diverse perspectives are similar. If one accepts criticisms about different epistemological perspectives and questions one's own assumptions, beliefs, and values, a welcoming of new and diverse perspectives could occur. Engaging in self and critical reflection and reflexivity is a deliberate, voluntary process that the online EdD students agree to engage in when entering a programme to improve practice. The gruelling intellectual demands of earning a doctorate implicate that doctoral students be open to criticism, which is the way of academia. An openness to criticism means that the student removes the ego from the research or writing process and engages in dialectic discourse and accepts feedback (in both written and face-to-face form) to construct a more discerning, coherent analysis. Through interaction with diverse students in the online EdD programme, participants could reflect deeply on social and political factors that influenced transnational contexts, and contrast diverse experiences and points of view with their own (also discussed in section 4.4.2). Appendix F provides two participants' in-depth written examples of how the online EdD phenomenon impacted their professional development and practices. Taking different courses of action and contextualizing new knowledge, which both participants did (as indicated in Appendix F), may relate to acting on changed meaning perspectives, which is a transformative learning outcome. The next section will discuss the theoretical and practice contributions that resulted from this study.

5.4 Theory and Practice Contributions

Learning may be analysed in many different ways, drawing from one, several, or an endless combination of theories to inform practice. One perspective to understand learning theory and its influence on practice is through three theoretical branches: behavioural, cognitive, and constructivist (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Ertmer and Newby discussed "translating learning theory into practical applications" (p. 44), as theory's fundamental purpose is to explain phenomena to better guide practice. Behavioural theory stresses environmental conditions that affect learning, where the teacher is viewed as "filling" the more passive student with

“knowledge,” the required material to be learnt. This is a valid way to view some learning, but behavioural principles do not account for developing students’ higher-level learning skills and deeper knowledge (Schunk, 2012). In terms of cognitive theory, knowledge acquisition pertains to how students organize, remember, and retrieve information, which is why assessing students’ prior knowledge is a key practice. This is a correct view, as students’ previous experiences may be used to draw connections among new ideas and build upon what is already known. Some theorists (e.g., Piaget) began to question the objectivist assumptions of behaviourism and cognitivism and thus adopted constructivist assumptions (students construct meaning from their own experiences and thus are actively engaged in learning) (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Constructivism also provides a useful view for how online EdD students learn.

Cognitive and social learning theory lenses provide relevant perspectives about practice. In section 3.2, the underpinning assumptions and relevance of social constructivism, a branch of constructivism, were clarified. Social constructivism stresses how collaboration and interactions with other students causes knowledge construction and meaning making (Creswell, 2013). In this section, underscored is the importance of drawing from a range of learning theories, or theoretical branches, to understand learning to effectuate effective practice. But presumed is not that there is a set of learning tasks or approaches that works in any learning context; each sociocultural context is too complex to provide a prescribed, standardised list of tasks or scripts for teachers. Specifically discussed are the theoretical and practical contributions of this study in relation to the existing literature.

5.4.1 Theoretical contributions

Transformative learning theory could be categorized as a cognitive learning theory originally but has been applied to many contexts and conceptualised in unique ways. Some of the transformative learning lenses have included psychocritical, psychoanalytical, psychodevelopmental, social emancipatory, neurobiological, cultural-spiritual, race-centric, and planetary (Taylor, 2008). Examining the alternate approaches to transformative learning is intellectually relevant, but the complex, fragmented lenses may not advance its application to educational contexts. The divergent approaches to analysing transformative learning could hinder meaningful theoretical advancement and neglect the complex learning process (Cranton, 2016; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Kroth & Cranton, 2014; Stuckey, Taylor, & Cranton, 2013). Broader classifications have been proposed, such as cognitive rational, extrarational, and social

change (Kroth & Cranton, 2014). This study considers how transformative learning impacts cognition, emotions, and actions in an effort to view the participants' learning experiences holistically. Even though transformative learning ultimately is a cognitive, rational process, whereby students assess their assumptions and develop more discerning views, research indicates that emotions have an inseparable role in planning, perceiving, learning, and evaluating (Chakraborty & Konar, 2009). Dirkx et al. (2006) conveyed that adult learning often is irrational, emotional, and intuitive. Taylor (2009) asserted that emotions are the primary component in adults' critical reflection and experience prioritization. Thus, this study emphasizes the participants' range of emotional responses to their learning. In addition, the social aspects of transformative learning should be considered and how students apply their learning. If the participants demonstrate that they have acted upon changed meaning perspectives based on learning in the online EdD programme, a fuller view of their learning outcomes may be clarified.

This study confirms that learning is an extremely complex process that should integrate the cognitive, extrarational, and social aspects of learning, which may require drawing from a range of learning theories. Although this is not a new idea in the field of educational research, the study provides rich stories that could deepen the understanding of the complex phenomenon of the online EdD. When applied separately, one cognitive or social learning theory does not fully consider the students' complex learning process (Illeris, 2009, 2014). A consideration still remains: that the multi-faceted theoretical grounding of transformative learning is complicated and adding an additional, complicated social theory may make understanding a learning phenomenon too broad. But the exact expectation of phenomenologically-informed research is to understand the essence of the experience, which is why this research has suggested that underscoring cognitive, extrarational, and social aspects of learning is relevant. Integrating both cognitive and social learning theory may further an understanding of how power dynamics influence learning outcomes as well (Elkjaer, 2009). Social theory perspectives could be integrated into the transformative learning ground, such as landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayer, 2015). Landscapes of practice, discussed in sections 2.1 and 5.3, represents the body of knowledge among practitioners and the context by which transformative learning may occur. Within the participants' stories, important to note is that varying communities formed what could be viewed as landscapes of practice. The communities could be analogised to concentric shapes that sometimes do not meet

or other times overlap and where the student may traverse from one concentric shape to another, contributing competent knowledge.

Figure 5.1 offers what I find to be a useful conceptual framework that emerged from this study's data. This conceptual framework is formed by two main components (i.e., transformative learning and landscapes of practice). As the expectation among online EdD students is that they experience a deep change in perspective, engage critical reflection, thinking, and reflexive skills, and therefore, make a social impact, transformative learning theory is a relevant idea for the type of learning outcomes that are expected among online EdD students. Because online EdD students are adult professionals and have countless, relevant, professional experiences to draw knowledge from, considering the adult students' experiences upholds their value in promoting learning among their peers, which is a more cognitive approach. As the students discuss issues on Blackboard (the public form of discussion forum) and in their learning teams, they construct meaning together, drawing from each other's professional expertise, experience, and perspectives. Solely reading the literature without contextualising it in a variety of settings lessens the vibrancy of what could be an engaging, stimulating, and relevant learning environment. The constructivist approach identifies the "context in which the skills will be learnt and subsequently applied [anchoring learning in meaningful contexts]" (p. 58): the student uses knowledge, and applies knowledge to solve problems (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). The transnational VLE context is acknowledged in Figure 5.1 because it is important to recognize the contextual uniqueness of an online EdD programme. Certainly, how the online context influences doctoral learning outcomes needs much more development, but it is relevant to consider how working with administrators, policy makers, professors, health care practitioners, and those in other professions around the world has the potential to initiate critical reflection on diverse cultural and social perspectives, opening a portal that would have been closed to full-time professionals a mere decade ago.

The conceptual framework draws attention to an analytical perspective of the online EdD phenomenon that could be useful when studying other online EdD students' learning experiences. But no presumption is made that this is the only way to conceptualise the online EdD students' experiences. The point here is that landscapes of practice could better integrate the extrarational (emotional, intuitive, imaginative, creative) and social (practical, contextual, cultural) factors into transformative learning theory. Landscapes of practice also implicate a sense of belonging, connectedness, and community, where the students truly feel part of a learning team: the social

presence of the tutor, peers, and colleagues. In the landscapes of practice, students could potentially feel better emotional and social support as they transition from practitioner to student in an online context that brings with it many anxieties and other detrimental emotional responses for some students (Dirkx & Smith, 2009; Ng, 2001).

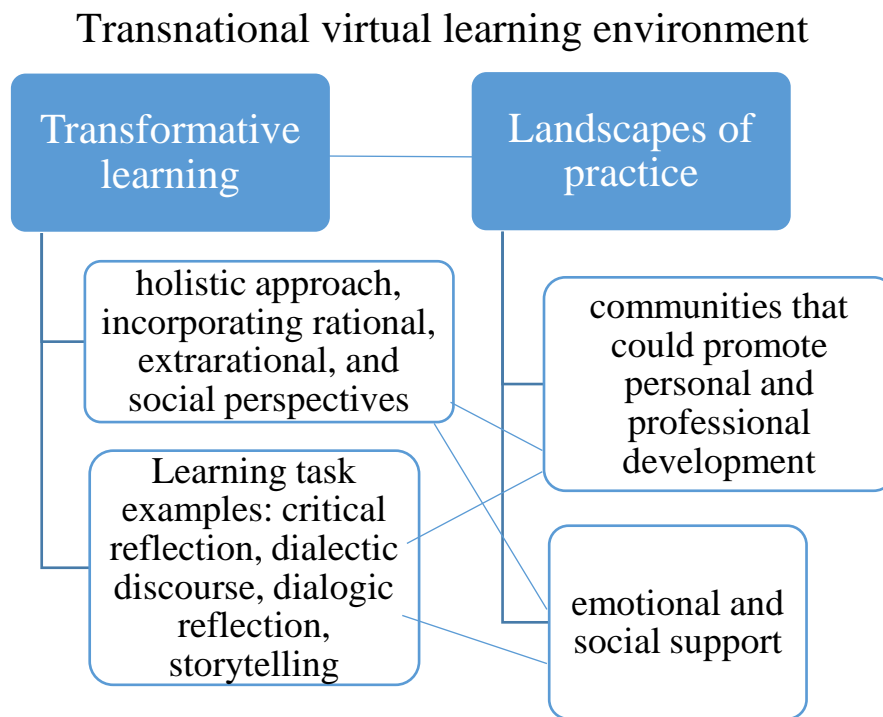


Figure 5.1. A proposed conceptual framework to explain the online EdD learning phenomenon

5.4.2 Practical contributions

This study's practical contributions result from the students' voices and interpretations of the data. Learning is too complex to suggest a set of learning tasks that will always lead to transformative learning among all students, but this study's results imply that certain learning tasks were more effective than others in helping the participants to challenge their prior assumptions and meaning perspectives. Critical reflection, dialectic discourse, dialogic reflections, storytelling, and applying new knowledge to practice were explored in section 5.2 as being relevant to the

participants in fostering transformative learning. Whilst acting on a changed meaning perspective is evidence of a transformative learning outcome (Mezirow, 1991), also what appears to be true is that acting on new knowledge (applying theory to practice) has the potential to promote reflection-in-action, reflexivity, and more insightful understandings of new ideas. Action research (mentioned in Chapter I as a core, required module in this programme) means to try new approaches, reflect on if they worked, and adapt practice in accordance with the reflections. This process appears to potentially lead to transformative learning. Learning that results from action research and practice-based learning could deepen knowledge about the practical approaches that professionals enact. The study results suggest that five of the eight participants conveyed what appears to be evidence of each of the ten transformative learning stages. That participants experienced transformative learning implicates that the online EdD programme in this study results in (what the researcher considers to be) quality learning outcomes, which should play a small role in addressing the negative perceptions of online EdD programmes (key issue one mentioned in section 1.3).

Although few opportunities for creativity (or extrarational approaches to learning) occurred in the online EdD programme (according to the participants), the data and research suggest that more creative approaches be taken. The course designer and/or tutor could decide on the most relevant creative approaches based on knowing the student and the uniqueness of a given module. To provide some ideas, research has conveyed the importance of storytelling (interrelated to role play) in deep learning and meaning making (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2009; Jarvis, 2012; Lawrence, 2012; Tyler, 2009; Tyler & Schwartz, 2012). Deep learning and meaning making through storytelling (and a variety of discussion forms) with fellow online EdD students is directly associated to the social constructivist approach and are learning outcomes that clearly are expected among doctoral students. One participant discussed the importance of viewing perspectives from others' perspectives (he was an administrator who viewed academic issues through the professors' perspectives), which led to bridging a relational divide. This also led to improved empathy, and the participant expressed that instead of only engaging in administrative work that he would like to teach in the future to apply some of the theoretical concepts to the classroom. Listening to this participant's response made it apparent that perhaps storytelling (and the ability to shift perspective roles: role play and empathy building) might provide the opportunity for online EdD students to connect prior experiences to new learning and gain more practical approaches to the theoretical

groundings taught in the modules. Storytelling and more creative approaches that the tutor deems as important may further enable students to perceive issues from diverse perspectives.

Whilst a variety of theoretical approaches are important to inform practice, suggested is that the individual tutor, as an effective one, engage with students and make important decisions about the types of learning tasks that would be best for the particular students in the module (their prior knowledge, responsiveness, and level of understanding) with focus on what is to be learnt. Overall, the online EdD students' and tutors' actions should exemplify what is meant by a connection between theory and practice, advocated for in the literature (Gordon, 2009; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). Emphasized in section 2.4 were the main inaccuracies and problems in disconnecting theory and practice (Henschke, 1994; Lindgren, 1959), as opposed to contextualizing practices in theoretical knowledge, as is a professional doctorate expectation (Quality Assurance Agency, 2015). The participants outlined specific ways of interrelating theory and practice as a result of the online EdD phenomenon. In an effort to merge theory and practice, constructivism underpins the instructional design of the university in this study. The online EdD students construct knowledge and make meaning with each other through the public form of discussion and in the learning teams. In contrast, professional development that is not associated with a degree programme is often in lecture format and has had little effect on teaching and student learning (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2015). Although this generalisation about all professional development is not necessarily true, it holds some truth in terms of professional development sometimes fulfilling a policy requirement that could have been spent on more professionally meaningful and enriching tasks. Professional development for college professors in any context would be more beneficial if meetings were held on a regular basis and involved more active learning tasks, scholarly (written and verbal) discussion, critical reflection, and reflexivity. However, time poses a serious logistical problem, as teachers (professors) often have full day teaching schedules (grading, tutorials, and office hours for various courses) and varying managerial roles to fill. This study raises the inquiry of whether or not professional development could be structured by using the constructivist approach that underpins the design found in the online EdD programme in this study. The constructivist approach could integrate more reflection of various kinds, contemplation of theoretically based practices, and knowledge construction with fellow practitioners.

The negative perceptions of EdD study, outlined in section 1.3, (Bitusikova, 2009; Poole, 2011; Taylor, 2008), were addressed when the participants described meaningful personal and professional development practices that effectuated some social change. The written policies of the Quality Assurance Agency and the policies of this university in the study appear to coordinate well. The participants' stories seem to confirm that the policies are being implemented, and doctoral quality is ensured through two hierarchical bodies that provide oversight (accountability and quality processes). The participants' stories indicate that they gave immediate focus and effort toward developing 'doctorateness' traits (Trafford & Leshem, 2009), and two have passed the viva since their participation in this study. The participants' stories have given rich data to address the key issue in section 1.3 about the negative perceptions of EdD study. The negative perceptions that may persist should be substantiated with clear evidence that associate clear expectations of quality and learning outcomes and how the EdD graduates did or did not meet or exceed them. Although individuals will hold their own opinions about the quality of online EdD programmes (regardless of what the research outcomes of this study are), a more reflective approach should be taken to analyse quality. This is because negative perceptions about online EdD quality harm the students (in terms of job promotion or even the recognition that their EdD is real), and though professional development and improvements to professional practice are key significances, an excessive amount of time, effort, and money is spent on these online EdD programmes. Given all of the factors involved in obtaining an online EdD, more consideration should be given to its perceived validity, for the students' well-being.

This study also promotes the importance of the community concept in a VLE, discussed in section 2.1. Although the importance of communities and support systems is not new in educational research, this study draws specific attention to the particular relevance of forming communities (or a collection of communities, as in landscapes of practice). The programme in this study offers Research Clusters and EdD Communities and Circles as possible communities or support systems among all its students and supervisors in the thesis stage. Based on participants' responses about the public form of discussion, a possible point to consider is that the Research Clusters and EdD Communities and Circles not be shared among all students and supervisors (tutors, cluster leaders) who are engaged in the thesis stage. Private communities among smaller student groups, perhaps the size of the learning teams, three to six, with a tutor that facilitates them may offer a more supportive VLE, if implemented well. The tutor and other stakeholders who

make decisions would have to determine what is most supportive to the students' intellectual, emotional, and social support based on their judgements and the student voice. A recommendation is that the tutor be properly trained on how to maintain supportive communities that improve cognitive, social, and teaching presence (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). As Crosta, Manokore, and Gray (2016) indicated that a 'pseudo online learning community' (p. 55) formed among the online EdD students who had learnt together throughout three modules and that the tutor should take a more active role in establishing the community, this finding also is true in this study. In addition, clear trainings, implementation, and reflections about how a tutor may form a supportive community should be given attention. Online EdD students could consider further (and be offered some type of trainings, such as brief conferences or master classes) on how to support their fellow students and engage in positive ways in the VLE. Further critical reflection and assessment on the effectiveness of the trainings in improving student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and support, and reducing the extremely high attrition rates, possibly may be enacted after each module and several times per year during the thesis stage.

This chapter discussed the participants' unique characteristics, learning experiences, and emotional and social challenges that they faced as online EdD students. The participants' stories indicated that the online EdD programme resulted in personal and professional development of varying degrees. A responsiveness to the student voice in shaping online EdD programmes should be clear, as these programmes continue to expand in developing and developed countries and online technologies make this possible. The final chapter will provide a research summary, research limitations, future areas of study, and reflections.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

In Chapter V, findings, implications, and contributions are offered. In summation, this study's results indicated that five of the eight participants experienced all ten transformative learning stages, indicated in Mezirow (1991). Main themes of personal development, perspective change, and social factors, as well as sub-themes related to each, emerged from the participants' stories (and the research analysis) and relate to transformative learning stages, which is shown in section 4.6. Unique social and emotional challenges among the participants were given focus, as were the participants' evident applications and improvements to professional practice as a result of the online EdD programme. An original theoretical framework is featured in Figure 5.1. Practical considerations relate to lending attention to the student voice in shaping policies and practice and drawing emphasis on how to address the sundry difficulties that the online EdD students experience. In this conclusion chapter, an explanation of this study's research limitations and researcher's reflections on the phenomenologically-informed process will be given. Recommendations for future study and personal reflections about undertaking this research also are shared.

6.1 Research Limitations

Specifying various limitations of the research study is an inherent and ethical practice of social science research (Wolcott, 2009). One limitation is that results may not be generalised to all online EdD students, but the study's purpose was not to oversimplify the social world by generalising outcomes (O'Neill, 2016). A purposive sampling technique also limits generalisations (Johnson & Christensen, 2008), and the sample size was not large. Nonetheless, collecting rich, in-depth data to procure the experience's essence is relevant (Moffett, 2006). Given that limited research exists about the specific participant group, more information could further the discourse about how online EdD learning outcomes are experienced. Future studies to add to the limited data about the student voice should be conducted. The purposive sampling limitations were addressed through triangulation, which enables checking multiple data sources for accuracy (Denzin, 1970; Stake, 1995). Throughout any study, transparency also is relevant and has been demonstrated by clearly specifying this study's methodological aims and outcomes.

Another limitation is the possibility of researcher bias that is present. To address this concern, a systematic process of bracketing out prior assumptions was undertaken, which allowed

open mindedness (Moustakas, 1994). A well-established data analysis process, which is outlined further in Chapter III, was utilized to ensure a rigorous analytical process (Moustakas, 1994). Enacting a critically reflexive approach to collecting and examining the data (Basit, 2010, 2013; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Rudman, 2013) whilst reflecting upon how personal values (Greenbank, 2003) and identity shape the research process (Vernon, 1997) is expected to counteract researcher bias.

More general limitations for many studies include researcher presence and participant response biases (Creswell, 2009). To mitigate this bias, participants had the option to leave the camera on or off during the Skype interviews. A friendly conversation was initiated at the interview's inception to establish rapport. In addition, participant response bias relates to incomplete or misconstrued responses. Because participants were examining their experiences retrospectively, they most certainly forgot some details or inadvertently changed their perceptions. To address this, requests for written documents were made. The written documents could include any reflective assignments, learning logs, discussion posts, or hand in assignments during the online EdD programme. Four of the eight participants shared various numbers of documents. The documents were particularly reflective. In accordance with ethical guidelines, the participants were not pressured to share more documents. Specifically, one participant included the discussion response from week one and hand in assignment three from the eighth module. Some relevant information about the participant's ideas for the action research project and how applying theory to the professional context were reflected in actions was involved. Another participant submitted the week ten discussion and learning log. Another sent five documents (four reflective assignments and a learning log), and the final participant sent two reflective assignments. The documents did not suggest any contradictions in interview responses and served a confirmatory role. The HEI's policy documents (e.g., the online EdD handbook, discussion, learning team, assignment prompts, Code of Practice for Research Degrees, Framework for Online Professional Doctorates, and relevant policy documents in the public domain and available for students) were a supplement to the participants' documents.

6.2 Reflection on the Phenomenologically-Informed Study

In this section, reflections on the phenomenologically-informed study, including its relevance, challenges, and considerations, are discussed. Phenomenologists study participants'

lifeworlds, how individuals live “not the world as it is measured, transformed, represented....” (Vagle, 2014, p. 22). What researchers once viewed as psychological becomes ontological, related to individuals’ being, which is interconnected to the world (Vagle, 2014). Assessing the online EdD phenomenon through the participants’ stories was the main relevance. Through collecting the participants’ stories, the phenomenologically-informed study is expected to construct the essence of the experience. Social constructivism underpins phenomenology, in that the former is involved in the study of not only the cognitive domain but actions; social constructivism removes focus from self and mind to incorporate the social dimension, assessing how a context and community shape habits and self (Garrison, 1998). Reflecting on self, context, and society may foster ideas for how to counteract oppressive realities and develop agency. Dialogue with different individuals who share unique experiences is expected to disrupt conditioned perspectives (habitual scripts), imagine new potentialities, and uphold democracy (Garrison, 1998). Phenomenology is a relevant guide because it permits researchers to study how individuals make meaning in relationship to other individuals, and how they deepen self-awareness and reflexivity.

Difficulties related to phenomenologically-informed research pertain to increasing validity and positivists’ understanding that interpretive, qualitative research holds meaning and significance in improving practices and policy. Researchers utilize two main processes to increase validity in phenomenologically-informed research: bracketing and active engagement during the entire project to understand the phenomenon (Vagle, 2014). Bracketing and active engagement was attained through journal writing, critical reflection, discussion with colleagues, textual study, and the systematic process that Moustakas (1994) outlined, which is discussed in detail in Chapter III. Balancing how to present rich, layered data of participants’ stories, whilst synthesizing the textural and structural descriptions was a challenge. Analysing the participants’ stories through the transformative learning theoretical lens was difficult. Interpretivism upholds humanistic tenets, viewing participants as whole persons, as opposed to quantifiable objects or subjects that exhibit quantifiable behaviours only. This is not to criticize the positivist paradigm but to promote critical reflexive thinking in research to influence and develop practice (Cole, Chase, Couch, & Clark, 2011). Ethical research should integrate critical reflection on the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and methods, despite how time consuming, perplexing, and challenging doing so may be. Giving an online survey, whereby the computer factors inputs, may not permit an in-depth understanding of how researcher subjectivity, context, participant perceptions, and innumerable

factors shape data models and results. Examining how complex that the learning experience and social context is upholds an ethical research approach despite hindering generalisations.

6.3 Recommendations for Future Study

Seven specific areas of study to extend this empirical investigation are recommended for future study.

1. Examining how nationalistic culture, personal background, and personal characteristics influence critical reflection should be researched further; pointed out in section 5.2 is the limited amount of research available to examine how diverse individuals approach critical reflection. Investigating specific factors that hinder and promote critical reflection may have pedagogical implications. How to balance critical reflection whilst maintaining supportive relationships has not been sufficiently researched.
2. Implementing an action research methodology is needed to examine which types of communities (support systems) are most beneficial for online EdD students. Forming better communities among online EdD students necessitates understanding which types of communities (i.e., communities of inquiry, communities of practice, landscapes of practice, communities of researchers) should be formed among different cohorts. Advocating for term consistency (that relates to communities) throughout the literature also is relevant. The term community is devalued when it is widely applied without criteria of what comprises one.
3. Conducting research on online EdD programmes in numerous continents (e.g., Middle Eastern, Asian, and North American) may hold professional relevance. The findings drawn from the diverse contexts would have a wider applicability and progress the student voice.
4. Engaging in a mixed methods study could be conducted to support this one. Discrepancies among qualitative and quantitative data could be examined to provide a more in-depth understanding of the online EdD phenomenon. Stuckey, Taylor, and Cranton's (2013) transformative learning survey could be given to thousands of online EdD participants within a variety of HEI's to conduct a longitudinal, transformative learning study.
5. Researching further the progression of reflective writing assignments to examine whether or not transformative learning truly is reflected in how the participants approach the writing task would be an interesting study aim.

6. Studying the relationship of transformative learning to other theories is a relevant area of research. Threshold concepts, explored in recent literature, (Barradell & Kennedy-Jones, 2015) hold theoretical similarities to transformative learning, in terms of the disorienting dilemma and liminality. Analysing how deep learning (Atherton, 2013) and knowledge transfer (Nonaka, 1997, 2007) are related to transformative learning are relevant areas of study. Investigating how the Ascent to Competence Framework (Levett-Jones et al., 2006; Levett-Jones & Lathlean, 2009) could compliment transformative learning theory would also be interesting.
7. Assessing how a combination of web 1.0-3.0 learning tools (Kimppa Kai, 2015) and Web X.0 (a prediction that the web eventually will integrate artificial intelligences) (Ifenthaler, 2013) may influence transformative learning and landscapes of practice present relevant areas of study in an online EdD programme. Web 1.0 learning tools pertain to information sharing, where users are more passive and do not contribute information; web 2.0 is when users create content, collaborate, and develop a community, and web 3.0 underscores how the technological tools may decipher meaning from accessible information (Ifenthaler, 2013). Participants used a combination of web 1.0-3.0 learning tools, but in-depth data about the effects of doing so was not obtained.

This study stimulated a number of inquiries about the online EdD students' experiences and how policy should improve belongingness, connectedness, and support in an online EdD programme to improve the student experience and reduce high attrition rates. Responding to transnational VLE issues necessitates further research about how new technologies and their use might influence the formation of communities.

6.4 Personal Reflection

“The research voyage is an independent venture and the decision to set out on it and to engage with a ‘new world’ is experienced as a personal choice” (Flutter, 2016, p. 9). This section will provide a personal reflection about the independent venture and ‘new world’ of the thesis stage and how my research has impacted my personal values, personal development, and professional practices. Personal reflection is conceptualised using Lyons’ (2010) framework that distinguishes three reflective methods discussed throughout social science research: reflection as

inquiry (Dewey, 1933), reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983), and reflection to develop critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

Inquiring further about the study's purposes, thesis coherency, data analysis, phenomenology, and a plethora of different concerns occurred. Writing a thesis that could pass was my adversity that led to many inquiries about my study's quality and value as a researcher. I asked myself, if saturation has been reached, new knowledge contributed, knowledge gaps filled, and improvements to practice made, which issues hindered earning the doctorate? Anxiety and occasional despair caused further isolation and loneliness at certain points during my research. I could identify well with protagonists in literary works (e.g., *Beowulf*, *King Lear*, *Siddhartha*, *The Life of Pi*). Defeating Grendel, his mother, and the dragon is not conceptually removed from what completing a professional doctorate felt like, and King Lear's egotism, naivete, powerlessness, and anguish resonated with me as well. My thesis process integrated a series of stages, progressions, events and experiences that were interwoven into a mosaic, much like *Siddhartha*, and I sometimes felt similar to how Pi experienced being on a boat in the middle of the ocean.

Reflection-on-action was relevant when conducting interviews, interacting with the participants, writing the thesis, and at all parts of the thesis stage. Being a teacher for eleven full-time years has often incorporated reflection-in-action as the classroom is an uncertain place with countless problems and inspirations. The reading, writing, and self-discovery process throughout the thesis has impacted how I approach teaching and make practice-based decisions on theoretical constructs and current research. I reflected on varying power structures: the hierarchical structure of organisations and power's historical legacy, of segregation and mistreatment, generational poverty, racism, and discrimination. Those in power at universities are the "gate keepers," and doctoral students could feel at their mercy. In researching the Quality Assurance Agency and local policies, the political and hierarchical context of a doctoral degree itself was analysed, as were the politically charged relationships within HEI's on varying levels, which improved critical consciousness.

Hughes and Tight (2013) described the research stage as a journey, and I further developed the values of resilience, perseverance, patience and humility. My professional responsibilities at work paled in comparison to the plight of Sisyphus that was writing an acceptable thesis, and I viewed finding balance as sometimes an unachievable feat. I experienced role identities that caused a variety of social and psychological challenges (Jazvac-Martek, 2009) because of the panoply of

responsibilities that coincided with each role: doctoral candidate, adjunct professor, high school teacher, Title I Coordinator, University Interscholastic League Coordinator, mother, wife, friend, and colleague. Nonetheless, these values that I developed during the research stage helped me to survive the doctoral journey.

My research journey bears some resemblance to the participants' experiences in that Figure 5.1 is a useful framework to analyse the impact that this research has had on my own professional practice. In conducting this research, the process has impacted my whole being, including the way that I engage in cognitive tasks, interrelate emotions and learning, interact in social settings, as well as perceive my personal agency and approach to seeking truth. I since have realised that my research should not be separated from the practical world of action and self but that research has coaxed a deeper self-awareness in my own abilities to act in a world that is riddled with constant change and chaos. The research journey should not be a solely individual embarkation but requires the intellect and wisdom of experts, supervisors, colleagues, and friends to challenge my ways of thinking and conclusions, to offer their perspectives and develop a supportive community, or landscapes of practice, for personal and professional development. I have since realised the significant value of critical reflection and discourse in my professional practices in many respects, and this process has not ended with the completion of study. I often collaborate with colleagues within my organisation and profession to improve my teaching practices and incorporate new strategies that will benefit student achievement. As opposed to using the same syllabi and lesson plans each year, I engage in hundreds of hours of professional development and collaboration that informs my teaching practices. I search for new books and articles that will stimulate students' curiosity and engagement, whereby they may engage in discussions about enduring conflicts and issues that are meaningful in their lives. I find myself more equipped to engage in effective teaching and learning practices because of my research findings and experiences that guide my actions, resulting in a deeper fulfilment in teaching.

Before the research journey, I questioned whether or not teaching was a profession where I could be successful, and if I should abandon the educational context altogether. Now, I find that the educational context is where I experience contentment and challenge. The EdD programme has enabled me to value teaching, critical reflection, the student voice, and transformative learning. Teaching should be valued because ultimately any educational organisation revolves around student learning, and the teacher is the one who is most directly responsible for encouraging it.

Figure 5.1 is relevant not only in understanding how I learn but in guiding learning, where an appreciation of each diverse student's experiences and perceptions incite a perpetual curiosity in the unseen and deeper understanding of education and knowledge. The barriers that many authors experience when trying to publish their work, a venture that many HEI's honour more than teaching when giving tenure, sometimes prohibit literary diversity and truth. Instead, the teachers and students are the most vital components of any HEI, where knowledge should sometimes be co-constructed, where all ideas are open to criticism, regardless of whether or not they originate from the teacher or student. Publishers may hold their own biases that prevent the dissemination of valuable knowledge, but the classroom is a freer environment, where ideas are contributed and questioned and not silenced and ignored. The empowerment and liberation that this research study promoted is what motivates me to continue reflecting on my practice. This freedom to search for the truth is at the very core of a university and democracy. Research and teaching hold prominence and distinction because they both should advance human understanding that creates a better world.

6.5 Conclusion

This study is expected to have relevance to the wider professional doctorate stakeholders because of the in-depth data provided by the online EdD participants. Readers may examine whether or not they have negotiated similar adversities and outcomes and how to develop support. This study addressed main research gaps related to explaining the online EdD phenomenon from the student's perspective. Advancing the online EdD student voice provides insights into the participants' lives and key issues to consider. Especially given how new that online EdD programmes are and the limited data about them, hopefully this thesis will inspire other researchers.

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Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Study

Transformative learning via virtual communities of practice in an online EdD programme

Invitation

I am Jamie Lopez, an online EdD student at The University of Liverpool, who is completing this project as part fulfillment of my Doctorate of Higher Education at the University of Liverpool.

You are invited to be a participant in my research study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to say no to this invitation or stop your participation at any time. Please read the information about the study and ask me any questions that you have.

Please let me know if you would like any additional information. You may discuss the information with your relatives, friends, and any person, as you deem appropriate. To emphasize, your participation is your choice, and you may say no to this invitation or agree to participate if you choose to. You may withdraw from the study at any time without having any penalty.

Thank you for your time and reading the information included in this invitation.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to investigate the individual and shared experiences of transformative learning (TL) via virtual communities of practice (VCoP's) among online EdD participants. For the purposes of this study, TL is defined holistically. TL refers to personal development, perspective changes, and/or social impact as a result of meaningful learning activities, such as critical reflection. A VCoP may be defined as a group of individuals who share similar interests (e.g., academic, professional) and interact for professional or organizational development purposes.

Main objectives of the study are to analyze how collaborating with your peers in the programme may be indicative of a transnational VCoP and could facilitate TL. The study will investigate how you benefitted your professional context as a result of TL. It is my hope that the study will foster an in-depth understanding of TL among doctoral participants and enable me to offer input

for programme improvements. Lastly, an aim of the study is to inform the higher education community of this study's results. If you have any additional questions or would like more information about the study, please email me at jamie.lopez@online.liverpool.ac.uk.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

The reason that you have been invited to take part is because you have finished one or more modules of the University of Liverpool's online EdD programme. I also do not know you personally and have not taken a module with you.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. Withdrawing would not incur any detriment to you.

What will happen if I take part?

I am the only researcher conducting this study. If you decide to take part in the study, you will be expected to email me as soon as it is convenient for you to do so. Hopefully, you will respond within one week if you would like to proceed. In your email response, you may ask any further questions about the study, and I will respond to you within 24 hours. The PIS will be sent to potential participants a minimum of 5 days before the planned interview will take place. This is to allow time for further questions to be asked and responded to before an informed decision can be made as to whether to take part or not. Then, I will ask to have a brief pilot interview on Skype, if you agree, or ask you a couple of questions by email, if you prefer. The pilot interview is not expected to take longer than ten minutes of your time. The purpose of the pilot interview is to ensure that you have experienced TL during the online EdD programme. After we mutually agree that you will take part in the study, I will send you a Participant Consent Form for you to sign and email back to me.

Then, we will schedule a formal interview on Skype that will not take more than one hour of your time. The interview will take place in my home and be audio recorded, only with your permission, so that I may transcribe it afterwards. In order to triangulate data, I may ask you if I may use documents from module work and reflection logs with your permission. Asking if you would like to send any module assignments or learning logs that provide evidence of TL will

take place during the interview. Again, emailing any module documents to me will be completely voluntary. After I complete the interview transcription and make any initial interpretations, I will email you this document if you would like. Then, you may feel free to check the transcription and interpretation. If you disagree or have questions about the interpretations, we may schedule a second interview, if you choose.

This is the extent of your participation. It is expected that you will not spend more than three hours of your time on this study over the course of one month's time. The three hours include the pilot interview, formal interview, module documents search, transcription check, and second interview, if you request it; less than three hours may be needed, and three hours is the maximum projected time.

If you choose to participate, your responsibilities are to:

- Email me back in no longer than two weeks, but hopefully sooner, of your intent to participate;
- Ask any questions about the study;
- Withdraw from the study as soon as possible if you decide that you no longer want to participate;
- Inform me of any discomfort during the study;
- Participate in a 10 minute pilot interview prior to the formal interview or written email correspondence, if you prefer;
- Sign the Participant Consent Form and email it back to me as soon as possible. The PIS will be sent to potential participants a minimum of 5 days before the planned interview will take place;
- Participate in a formal interview that will take no longer than one hour of your time. The formal interview will be audio and video recorded only if you give permission for me to audio and video record the interview;
- Send me any documents that provide evidence of TL (e.g., course work, learning logs) if you choose to share any documents;
- Read the interview transcription and interpretation *if you choose to*;
- Request a second interview, *if you choose to*, if you disagree with the transcription, interpretations, or have any further questions.

Expenses and / or payment

You will not receive any money or reimbursement for your participation in this study.

Are there any risks in taking part?

There are no perceived risks in taking part in this study, except that you may not want to include any documents that provide evidence of TL. It is completely optional to provide any documents. If you experience any discomforts during the study, please let me know so that we may stop the study immediately. I then will contact my primary supervisor. I also will alert the Research Ethics Committee within 24 hours.

Are there any benefits in taking part?

Yes, it is hoped that your participation will encourage critical reflection about your TL experiences during the online EdD programme. Your comments may provide input for programme improvements. Another perceived benefit is sharing your stories about TL experiences during an online program to inform the broader higher education community.

What if I am unhappy or if there is a problem?

If there is any problem as a result of the study, please let me know by contacting the Principal Investigator, Jamie Lopez, at jamie.lopez@online.liverpool.ac.uk. You may contact Dr. Ruolan Wang, my thesis supervisor, at ruolan.wang@online.liverpool.ac.uk. If your complaint still is not resolved, you should notify the Research Governance Officer at ethics@liverpool.ac.uk. Please provide the Research Governance Officer with my name and/or study description and any specific information about the complaint you would like to make.

Will my participation be kept confidential?

Neither your name nor identifying information will be revealed if you choose to participate. Your identity will remain anonymous. Participants names will not be disclosed in any written documents, such as research reports, presentations, thesis, or publications. Data will be anonymized by assigning you with a number (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etcetera). The name of the institution will be kept anonymous. Only I will be present during the data collection process (interviews and email correspondence). The Skype interviews will be private and free from disturbance. Participants' names and contacts will be destroyed when data collection

process will end together with the interview recordings once transcription of data will be concluded. My primary supervisor, Dr. Ruolan Wang, and secondary supervisor, Dr. Janet Strivens, may have access to the data, if they request to check the analysis. I will save all electronic data on my personal, password protected computer that is stored in my home and on an external hard drive. I am the only person who has access to the personal computer and hard drive where data will be stored. N-Vivo, a software platform, will be used to help me analyze the data. Any hard files will be stored in a locked file cabinet drawer that only I access. All data will be stored safely for at least five years. If accepted, I would like to publish the study, and your identity will be protected at all times.

What will happen to the results of the study?

If you choose, I will send you the results of the study. The completed thesis may be stored on an online repository that you may access if you choose. Please inform me if you would like notification if the results are published. You will remain anonymous even if the results are published.

What will happen if I want to stop taking part?

You may withdraw from the study at any time and without explanation. You may withdraw from the study at any time without having any penalty. If you give me permission, I may use the data up to the point of withdrawal. Please let me know if you would like for results to be destroyed and not used. Results may be destroyed only before they are anonymized.

Who can I contact if I have further questions?

If you have further questions, please contact the Principal Investigator, Jamie Lopez, at jamie.lopez@online.liverpool.ac.uk. You also may contact Dr. Ruolan Wang, my thesis supervisor, at ruolan.wang@online.liverpool.ac.uk

Thank you again for reading this invitation.

Respectfully,

Jamie Lopez

Appendix B
Committee on Research Ethics
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research

Project:

Transformative
learning via virtual
communities of
practice in an online
EdD programme

**Please
initial
box**

Researcher: Jamie Lopez

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these questions answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, without my rights being affected. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

3. I understand that, under the Data Protection Act, I can at any time, *before the anonymization process*, ask for access to the information I

provide, and I can also request the destruction of that information if I wish, *before the anonymization process*.

4. I agree to take part in the above study.

☐

5. I understand and agree that once I submit my data it will become anonymised and I will therefore no longer be able to withdraw my data.

☐

6. I understand that confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify me in any publications.

☐

7. I understand and agree that my participation will be audio recorded, and I am aware of and consent to your use of these recordings so that the researcher may complete a verbatim transcription of the interview. The audio recording will be deleted after the verbatim transcription.

☐

Participant Name

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature

Researcher:

Name: Jamie Lopez

Email: jamie.lopez@online.liverpool.ac.uk

V4, 1/26/2015

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

1. Please briefly introduce yourself. What are your professional roles and responsibilities?
Did the reflective assignments during the Doctoral Development Plan modules impact your learning? How so?
2. What is your opinion of the learning logs?
3. Did your beliefs about online education ever change during the EdD programme?
4. What were any pros and/or cons of working in a learning team?
5. Do you believe that working in a learning team ever impacted your critical thinking skills/reflective thinking skills/analytical skills? Please give specific examples.
6. Do you believe that working in a learning team ever benefitted your self-concept or perception of your own abilities of working? Please explain.
7. Which learning activities that you completed during any EdD module were most useful to your work? For example, in Module 9, instructions for Week 1 of the Learning Team activities say that “Your Learning Team work in other modules has often required you to produce team summaries or products. The focus in this module is instead on bringing your own questions and insights to the team, offering constructive feedback, and sharing perspectives you have developed on your various research interests within the framework of current global trends and the internationalisation of higher education. You are to evaluate one another’s research questions, share data that may enhance your colleagues’ research, and incorporate concepts and comparative analysis from resources and your professional and institutional experiences.”
8. Did you ever feel uncomfortable about any new way of working/learning/thinking that you encountered during the EdD programme?
9. Did your learning during the EdD lead to a noticeable impact on your professional work?
If so, can you give an example of what has changed in your professional way of working and/or thinking?
10. Do your colleagues or students or anyone at work notice or make comments on any changes you’ve made?
11. How did you apply any learning during the EdD programme to your professional context?

- a. Please give me a story about this. I would appreciate a real example.
12. Are you comfortable with sharing any of your work during an EdD module with me (e.g., hand-in assignments, reflective assignments, learning logs, or learning team responses that you've written without names)? Sharing documents is completely optional, but I would like some documents if you don't mind so that I may have more examples of transformative learning. I plan on triangulating your responses during the interview and any of the module documents that you give me.

Appendix D

The information within this table lists specific examples of each data analysis step. Steps 1-7 were written verbatim from Moustakas's (1994) book. See page 120-121 in Moustakas (1994) for further detail about each step. Moreover, only some examples were included in this table.

Analysis of Phenomenological Data	Some Examples	My Comments
Listing and Preliminary Grouping	Research In-practice Intrinsic need Challenges Changes to practice Improve professional practice New knowledge Variety of perspectives Trust Collaborative learning Social networking Long-term improvement Personal growth Reflective practice Critical Social activity	Commonalities among the transcripts and documents emerged. The three main themes where all list items and group clustering fit were personal development, perspective changes, and social factors.

	<p>Comfort zone</p> <p>Reflecting</p> <p>Empowered</p> <p>Confident</p> <p>Relationships</p> <p>Collective success</p> <p>Feedback</p> <p>Goal-oriented</p> <p>Critical thinking</p> <p>Critical reflection</p> <p>Rewarding</p> <p>Discussion forum</p> <p>Dialogue</p> <p>Struggle</p> <p>Social interaction</p> <p>Social impact</p>	
Reduction and Elimination	<p>Examples of information that was eliminated include the following:</p> <p>“Do you prefer the camera on or off?”</p> <p>“Morning time we must take care of the clinic.”</p>	<p>I crossed out any sentences, phrases, or words that did not pertain to the online EdD phenomenon. I also began to group certain words under a broad theme. For example, in practice, changes to practice, and</p>

	“Uh, so today was almost a storm day but not quite...”	improve professional practices could be discussed in terms of social factors.
Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents	Core themes include personal development, perspective changes, and social factors.	Core themes are listed below with examples from participants.
Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation	Personal development, perspective changes, and social factors.	I checked core themes many times to validate them.
Using the relevant, validated invariant constituents and themes...	<p>Next, I will provide an excerpt of one Individual Textural Description.</p> <p><i>The online EdD has led to my personal growth through reflective practice. I believe that examining my experiences critically is an integral part of learning. In the first module, I developed the basic doctoral student skills.</i></p> <p><i>To develop doctoral student skills, I went through immense emotional strain. I realized many new things through critical reflection. For example, I now understand</i></p>	Each participant had a unique Individual Textural Description. In this step, the researcher should provide verbatim examples, which are provided in Appendix E.

	<i>the importance of interaction among students, as well as how significant that blending practice and knowledge are.</i>	
Construct for each co-researcher an Individual Structural Description...	A main structure for some participants was the transformative learning process.	For example, most participants described emotional intensity and problems that were eventually overcome through sustained reflection, interaction, and peer networks. Many participants elaborated on their new perspectives gained throughout the online EdD programme and how they applied their learning to their professional practices.
Construct for each research participant a Textural-Structural Description...	Handwritten journal responses and annotations on the transcripts and documents offer a description for each participant.	I had to reflect critically and read through and analyse the data many times. From my writings and analysis, I developed a description of the online EdD “essences of the experience, representing the group as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p.121).

Appendix E

Additional participant quotes to provide further evidence of main themes and sub-themes.

Category	Personal development	Perspective changes	Social factors
Participant quotes	<p>“I’ve gone through an homage at a different level in terms of managing time and stress and sometimes that made me realize that some of the problems I had in my professional environment were not as big as I thought they were” (Benjamin).</p>	<p>“I knew that we had an impact on society, but I think the scale and extent to which we were able with our own actions to have a greater impact changed in my mind...I think higher academic members helped me bridge the gap between the administrative staff and faculty members” (Benjamin).</p>	<p>“Now, whenever I have a chance, I try to participate in meetings, be part of certain networks. I, also, communicate in projects.” (Benjamin)</p>
	<p>“Yes [the EdD programme] changed my teaching...I stress more about the critical thinking” (Mira).</p>	<p>“My style of tutorial is a little bit modified...I always remind [students] before tutorial to bring their electronic gadgets...they need to check online...” (Mira).</p>	<p>“And I felt like I learned a lot from [fellow EdD participants], simply from the way they wrote things down.” (Mira)</p>

	<p>“Having to produce work that incorporated those techniques [statistical analysis] even in a limited way were very helpful...I had to think about what I was learning, what my weaknesses were, where I needed to focus my energies. I found that crucial to moving forward” (Alex).</p>	<p>“Getting feedback and giving feedback kind of developing particular aspects of the thought process was really interesting...kind of drew my attention to different ways of thinking and the importance of... considering other people’s points of view a lot more.” (Alex).</p>	<p>“[The EdD curriculum will] effect the development of my curriculum or approaches or methods going forward as I reopen my ESL school” (Alex).</p>
	<p>“Informed comments all the time and keep a high level of interaction. So that aspect shocked me to be honest...Even though it was mutually beneficial, but I found it very demanding...to making it a meaningful contribution” (Kaitlyn).</p>	<p>“I’m working in an organization that’s experiencing a lot of change at the moment. I’m looking at it with new eyes, with more informed eyes, of what the policy issues could be, maybe what they should be, and how they could be impacting on the organization as a whole rather than me as a practitioner” (Kaitlyn).</p>	<p>“I found [learning team critical feedback] helpful and enlightening. Really, it was meant in the spirit of supporting, and that’s how I took it. And any of my comments to other people were meant in the spirit of supporting people. I found that really valuable...It really helped me...It was a very deep learning experience because of that” (Kaitlyn).</p>

	<p>“But [the EdD programme] certainly allowed me to get through things and make sense of things because it gives you the tools for thinking through for critically thinking through.” (Bree).</p>	<p>“And then when somebody else comes up with something you haven’t thought about before, then it’s brilliant. And you go, oh wow, that’s brilliant, and then you can go down the other lines of other people, and it’s great” (Bree).</p>	<p>“[My husband and I have] been able to work together with the tools that I’ve used to turn things around [in the business]. So [the strategies I learned in the EdD programme] work. I can tell you they work just as well for business as they do for school” (Bree).</p>
	<p>“That reflective practitioner piece that whole piece around thinking about what we’re doing, and why we’re doing it, and what’s the philosophy behind it, and how can we grow and make it better; those ideals...within the programme have really helped me at work because I’m thinking different at my work place” (Vincent).</p>	<p>“I’m thinking more about the structure of the organization. What improvements I can make and what changes that can happen, so I really do see that change is there” (Vincent).</p>	<p>“And I enjoyed sharing with others, and I enjoyed hearing what others had to say. So that kind of information sharing and collaboration, thought that was wonderful” (Vincent).</p>

	<p>“I do think [the EdD programme] makes you look at things differently as I think it develops a level of critical awareness to the external world, which certainly was very valuable to me” (Brianna).</p> <p>“I was able to improve my expression of English...Our lingua franca is English, so it’s a great asset if you’re proficient in the English language...” (Maximillian).</p>	<p>“Seeing how different people would formulate answers. Their ideas of approaching tasks, the content they would include. That was very useful. That added value to the way you were thinking about things...” (Brianna).</p> <p>“Yes, it was a practice run for all these skills [critical, reflective and analytical thinking skills] because I had to make comments that people made in the [discussions] and have a practical view on them” (Maximillian).</p>	<p>“[The EdD programme] makes me want to model perhaps educational values in a different way now. Maybe they’re learning from me. Yeah, I guess just certainly a maturity in the way my view of education, working with colleagues [changed]” (Brianna).</p> <p>“I was able to suggest [experts] for workshops, for our events that we have to organize... I could see that my superiors were very satisfied by my more competent input in our professional meetings and our advisory sessions” (Maximillian).</p>
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Appendix F

Written Responses from Participants

An Excerpt from Kaitlyn's Reflective Assignment in Doctoral Development Plan 1

Schon, as cited in Brockbank, (2007), observes that the value of Professional Doctorates to the practitioner is in developing skills whilst being mindful of the many variables that are to be experienced in the workplace. I identify completely with Schon's description of the "artistry", (p86), of the professional which empowers me to reflect on my strengths and weaknesses as related to my studies. I am becoming aware of the most apparent differences between online and face-to-face learning which is, in the absence of the physical presence of a tutor, as I encountered problems, I quickly learned to probe more and explore further to find the answers. I realized that it is important, as an online student, to work independently and to trust my instincts when producing a piece of work. Developing my critical thinking skills was crucial so that I could take advantage of all learning opportunities and in turn become a more useful member of the learning community. This in turn empowered me to transform my learning from surface to profound, and importantly, not to be intimidated by others who appeared to be more knowledgeable. Relying on my study cohort and their support allowed me to depend less on the tutor and to benefit from the collaborative aspect of my learning. On reflection, I am realizing that my weakness became my strength. I now feel confident about beginning my second module.

An Excerpt from Kaitlyn's Reflective Assignment in Doctoral Development Plan 9

Research located in practice, where the needs of the institution, practitioners and practice determine the problems from which research questions emerge, is based on a need to understand the complex connection between policy, decision-making and practice, all whilst considering the impact of global activity on higher education (Campbell, Delong, Griffin and Whitehead, 2013 and Coghlan and Brannick, 2010).

From this starting point, I am aware that to initiate practitioner research in my setting, there will be challenges, however I continue to have an intrinsic need to investigate the ways in which

institutions within a changing educational landscape in an emerging nation can respond to the many governmental initiatives being introduced (Raven, 2011 and UAE Government Website, n.d.).

My context - a changing Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), operating within a developing nation such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), facing challenges compounded by the demands placed on a higher education sector that are common to other contexts. However, additional responsibilities are being placed on the governance of and practices within educational organisations that are testing the ability of such institutions to respond to political, societal and cultural changes happening on an unprecedented scale (Romani, 2009). It is my intention to investigate the perceptions of practitioners within higher education (HE) as to their views of possible ways forward for this dynamic sector within this emerging economy, all the whilst contextualizing my inquiry within a global environment, as Ramady (2012) puts forward – without this wider perspective, any study of the UAE’s educational activity would lack significance.

Recommendations that I make, such as proposed changes to practice or new knowledge I generate as a result of my research will, as Casey (2012) claims, be required to be sufficiently robust to withstand a high level of scrutiny. In depth evaluation and questioning is to be expected by all stakeholders, especially my fellow practitioners. As McNiff and Whitehead (2005) postulate a need to study one’s context demands that the type of research objectives set by the researcher are vital to the eventual success of that practitioner research

Set against this backdrop that I propose the following research project.

Proposed Practitioner Research Question – connection to practice

The HCT has recently set a strategic goal to be the leading HE provider , HCT Website, HCT News (2013) and taken together with the drive for ‘Emiratisation’ now enjoying a renewed place on the UAE Government’s list of priorities, Emiratisation.org (2103), change is urgently and absolutely impacting my context.

Operating within a changing internal and external environment, economically, politically and socially Al-Ali (2008) and Sambridge (2013) has fueled my desire to investigate just how a changing Higher Educational institution (HEI) impacts on practitioners, learners, policy makers

and decision makers. It is not possible to consider all these factors in one research project, however all are vital to the establishing of backdrop against which much change has taken place within a relatively short period of time. Byat and Sultan (2014) and Ryberg and Larsen (2008) discuss the development of the Knowledge Economy as a strategy for the UAE decision-makers and Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley (2009) point to the international trend towards using HE as a means by which change can be conceived, created and implemented. This is very much a driver of my research and is a view of HE activity and development which is characterized by this Nation's response to global trends (Sophia, n.d.).

An Excerpt from Benjamin's Reflective Assignment in Doctoral Development Plan 1

In that, I agree with Vygotsky (1978) that my capacity to reflect on my own learning and practice directly came from the social interaction created by the EdD program. I now realise that I have short-term and long-term expectations as regards personal development (Lee, 2008): I have a rewarding job and I work in an environment which provides me with a sense of fulfilment because of its social impact but I have reached a level where I need more 'fuel' to keep motivated and willing to change my working environment. This 'fuel' can only come from an external source and I now realise that I needed the stimulus of a training program to react and consider more openly my personal situation. In the long run, I may well become more interested in academic positions than purely managerial positions within the educational environment, in order to be at the core of the academic experience and apply some of the interesting concepts which were approached in this introductory phase of the programme.

During the module, I found the concept of emancipation (Foucault, 1988) very interesting and well adapted to the professional doctorate experience, especially for managers in their mid-career who have been used to doing things in a certain way and deeply influenced by their professional context. As Brookfield claims (1987), I need to become more aware of the social context surrounding me to critically reflect on my professional practice and this can be applied to the learning experience as well. My current professional context does not promote critical thinking as a tool to improve professional practice and the decision making style, mostly based on reproducing previous experiences, can prove extremely frustrating at times. This is why I value the experience of the

EdD so far because it helps me to internalise the professional problematic which I am facing and provides me with powerful concepts to defend a different approach in the workplace.

An Excerpt from Benjamin's Reflective Assignment in Doctoral Development Plan 8

The Action Research module represented an excellent opportunity to experience research in my own professional setting and to understand the specificities of this research approach compared to other research traditions. The learning by doing approach took me through the successive steps of action research and enabled me to see more clearly the challenges associated with action research. Beyond the individual learning outcomes, the experience of the module convinced me that my current professional context is not well suited for professional research because "power relationships are getting in the way of participative working" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010, p.127). Thus, I will keep my initial plan and use the Consortium of International Double Degrees (www.ciddd.org) as a platform for my final research thesis, focusing on the impact of double degrees on students' career prospects.

Appendix G
Confirmation of Ethics Approval

Dear Jamie

I am pleased to inform you that the EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC) has approved your application for ethical approval for your study. Details and conditions of the approval can be found below.

Sub-Committee:	EdD. Virtual Programme Research Ethics Committee (VPREC)
Review type:	Expedited
PI:	
School:	Lifelong Learning
Title:	
First Reviewer:	Prof. Morag A. Gray
Second Reviewer:	Dr. Lucilla Crosta
Other members of the Committee	Dr. Ewan Dow, Dr. Marco Ferreira, Dr. Peter Kahn, Dr. Janis McIntyre;
Date of Approval:	5 th February 2015

The application was APPROVED subject to the following conditions:

Conditions

		M: All serious adverse events must be reported to the VPREC within 24 hours of their occurrence, via the EdD
1	Mandatory	Thesis Primary Supervisor.

This approval applies for the duration of the research. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study as specified in the application form, the Sub-Committee should be notified. If it is proposed to make an amendment to the research, you should notify the Sub-Committee by

following the Notice of Amendment procedure outlined at

<http://www.liv.ac.uk/media/livacuk/researchethics/notice%20of%20amendment.doc>.

Where your research includes elements that are not conducted in the UK, approval to proceed is further conditional upon a thorough risk assessment of the site and local permission to carry out the research, including, where such a body exists, local research ethics committee approval. No documentation of local permission is required (a) if the researcher will simply be asking organizations to distribute research invitations on the researcher's behalf, or (b) if the researcher is using only public means to identify/contact participants. When medical, educational, or business records are analysed or used to identify potential research participants, the site needs to explicitly approve access to data for research purposes (even if the researcher normally has access to that data to perform his or her job).

Please note that the approval to proceed depends also on research proposal approval.

Kind regards,

Morag Gray

Chair, EdD. VPREC

Appendix H

PGR Declaration of Academic Integrity



PGR Policy on Plagiarism and Dishonest Use of Data – Annexe 1

PGR DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

NAME (Print)	Jamie Lopez
STUDENT NUMBER	H00021068
SCHOOL/INSTITUTE	University of Liverpool
TITLE OF WORK	Impact of an Online EdD Programme on Personal Development and Professional Practices

This form should be completed by the student and appended to any piece of work that is submitted for examination. Submission by the student of the form by electronic means constitutes their confirmation of the terms of the declaration.

Students should familiarise themselves with Appendix 4 of the PGR Code of Practice: PGR Policy on Plagiarism and Dishonest Use of Data, which provides the definitions of academic malpractice and the policies and procedures that apply to the investigation of alleged incidents.

Students found to have committed academic malpractice will receive penalties in accordance with the Policy, which in the most severe cases might include termination of studies.

STUDENT DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- I have read and understood the University's PGR Policy on Plagiarism and Dishonest Use of Data.
- I have acted honestly, ethically and professionally in conduct leading to assessment for the programme of study.
- I have not copied material from another source nor committed plagiarism nor fabricated, falsified or embellished data when completing the attached material.
- I have not copied material from another source, nor colluded with any other student in the preparation and production of this material.
- If an allegation of suspected academic malpractice is made, I give permission to the University to use source-matching software to ensure that the submitted material is all my own work.

SIGNATURE Jamie Lopez

DATE June 14, 2017